Becoming

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Becoming

by Damonfreak89

Summary

Season 3 of my A/B/O re-write of Hannibal.

After the brutal events of Baltimore, Hannibal Lecter flees to Europe, swiftly pursued by a vengeful Will. Finally reuniting in Florence, Alpha and Omega come under attack from without and within as old enemies resurface to kill Dr Lecter, at any cost.

Six years later, a new killer is targeting suburban families, and Jack Crawford needs Will Graham's help to catch them. To be of use to the FBI, Will needs to remember how to think like a killer, and Hannibal Lecter is the only person he can turn to. But old wounds heal slowly, with unexpected consequences.

Notes

*** FEB 2021 UPDATE: Please note, due to my obsessive nature, I have fallen head-over-heels in love with a Batman/Joker fanfic that I am currently writing (I am weeeeeeak!!!) and so updates on this story will be slower than planned. I am very, very sorry. Bad author! I promise, though, this is still a WIP and will be finished, as well as continued Post Season 3 to ensure a Happy Ending as per the tags! Just a head's up because it's not fair to keep y'all waiting forever with no reason. ***

Hey peeps! So, you'll notice that I've started taking more liberties with this season – as much as it does continue to follow canon in terms of plot, dialogue and character placement, I have tweaked a few scenes here and there (because I'd much rather have lots and lots of Hannibal and Will action, instead of Hannibal and Bedelia.)

All shall be explained over the course of the season.

Comments are, as always, welcomed and appreciated. I hope there aren't too many typos, and that you enjoy!!!

Happy New Year!

Antipasto

ONE

Antipasto

NOW

Under the light of a summer moon, a sleek black Ducati *Diavel 1260* cruises through the Parisian side streets. Car headlights and streetlamps reflect in the black helmet visor, and the arcing light atop the Eiffel Tower splinters the low hanging clouds descending on the city.

Dressed in black leather from head to toe, the rider deftly dodges the cars on the Champs-Élysées, following, from memory, the intricate path to the Ritz. There is a black-tie gala here, tonight, and they have timed their arrival to be fashionably late.

In true European style.

Hannibal Lecter pulls up to the curb and cuts the engine of his motorcycle. He removes his helmet, savoring the cool breeze on his face. It is June, and he's warm in his riding gear. Thankfully, the lobby inside is air-conditioned, and Hannibal unzips his leather jacket, allowing his thin black t-shirt to breathe.

He's been in Paris for six months; four months longer than planned. Unfortunately, with the FBI on his tail, he requires a cover identity, and pickings have been slim on the ground.

Until now.

Alphas and their respective Omegas gather in small groups, chattering away over canapes and flutes of the finest champagne. There are a number of Betas, too, as well as unaccompanied Omegas – a scandalous affair in conservative America, commonplace in more liberal countries.

Hannibal enter the hotel and takes a glass from a passing waiter, sipping Moët as his dark eyes restlessly search for his prey. A circuit of the room confirms he is not inside, so he makes for the terrace.

Two doormen pull open the glass doors, inclining their heads as Hannibal descends the steps to the terrace.

There you are.

Beyond the polished hairdos and glittering earrings of the Parisian elite, Hannibal spots a middle-aged Alpha, dressed in an expensive tuxedo and Rolex watch, which flashes every time he lifts his champagne glass to his mouth.

Dr Roman Fell. He has recently applied to work at the *Palazzo Capponi* in Florence, though his paper has yet to be submitted. His Omega-*secondi*, Gabrielle, stands beside him, smiling at something Roman has just said, fawning over him like the lovesick mistress she is.

How very antiquated, Hannibal thinks, sliding through the crowd like a hunting shark. *To have a harem of Omegas, like the Romans of your namesake.*

He stops a distance away, watching as Roman gesticulates with his free hand, and revulsion crawls up his spine at the adoration lavished upon such an ignorant, petulant man.

After a couple of minutes, he becomes aware of someone watching him, even as he watches the other Alpha. His admirer's energy is playful; flirtatious, and, when Hannibal separates the scents assaulting his nose, he is able to distinguish the sweet musk of an unbonded Omegan male.

Almost as sweet as Will.

Hannibal glances from the corner of his eye, watching as a young man winks at him and knocks back one of his two glasses of champagne. He's attractive; curling brown hair, lighter than Will's but similar texture. Sparkling blue eyes, ringed with gold… Dimples in his cheeks and the same soft beard and moustache of his former Omega.

Comparing a new sexual interest with a previous mate… A typical reaction to grief, Hannibal thinks, viciously squashing his initial desire to dismiss the approaching man. Why shouldn't he have a little fun, after all?

'Anthony Dimmond,' the Omega says, by way of introduction. His voice is melodic, the British accent clipped and polished, utterly in synch with his floral scarf, navy silk shirt and frock coat. He looks like an artist, or a student of art, and Hannibal can imagine how he would look sketched out on paper, resplendent in charcoal.

'Boris Jakov,' Hannibal lies, and Anthony grins again, gesturing with the champagne flutes.

'I'd offer a hand, but…' He shrugs an apology, and Hannibal smiles back, his eyes sparkling.

'It's a double-fisted kind of bash,' he teases, and, to his delight, Anthony blushes, just a little, even as he chuckles.

Hannibal roves Anthony's body, regarding his slender torso and slim hips, assessing and judging in an instant.

Acceptable.

Anthony gestures towards Fell and his entourage.

'Do you know Roman well?' he asks. Hannibal feigns polite confusion, and Anthony's eyes flash gold with humor. 'You were staring with the thinly-veiled disdain of a man who *does*,' he explains, going on to add, helpfully, 'I was his TA at Cambridge. He was insufferable even then.'

Gulping back the last of his second champagne, Anthony deposits both glasses, somewhat clumsily, onto a passing tray and reaches into the breast pocket of his coat, revealing a paperback book with a flourish.

‘Have you read his books?’ he asks, showing Hannibal the spine of the latest one. He leans closer and, in a whiff of tasteful cologne and Omegan musk, adds in a theatrical whisper, ‘They’re *terrible*.’

Hannibal says nothing, content to watch the man flirt shamelessly with him. It’s pleasant, after all, to be the center of someone’s attention.

‘You *know* they’re terrible,’ Anthony purrs, closing the distance even more between them, scenting the Alpha and smiling at the warmth of his interest. ‘You’re just too polite to say.’ He takes a chance and nudges a leather-clad upper arm, near-swooning at the size of the bicep muscle. ‘Blink if you agree.’

Hannibal smiles, just a fraction, and blinks, making Anthony brighten with a laugh.

‘See?’ The Omega nudges him again and then turns back to stare at Roman before he jumps the man in front of everyone. ‘That doesn’t stop him squatting over his keyboard and depositing a fresh one every six to either months,’ he continues, rolling his eyes. ‘It takes *me* six to eight months to write one *line*.’

Hannibal takes a long drink of champagne, wondering how Will would respond to such a zesty personality as Anthony Dimmond, and then decides to indulge his curiosity.

‘Why?’

What layers do you have? How deep does your mind go?

Anthony’s eyes wrinkle and he shrugs, laughing at himself.

‘Poetry is hard.’ He looks at his former mentor again. ‘Too hard for *Roman*. It’s *much* easier for him to slide into academia and dissect the work of others than it is to stand by his *own* words.’

He nods, sagely, and Hannibal’s flicker of interest dies.

Petty, vain and, ultimately, boring.

Anthony Dimmond will be a pleasurable distraction for an evening, perhaps two, but nothing more.

In keeping with the charade, however, Hannibal replies, agreeably,

‘One can appreciate another’s words without dissecting them. Though,’ he adds, almost as if it is an afterthought; ‘on occasion, dissection is the only thing that will do.’

As if on cue, the sound of steel being unsheathed rings out across the terrace. Glass breaks and corks erupt from champagne bottles with a bang. Hannibal, Anthony and several other

guests look over, watching in surprise as a waiter, dressed in a guard's costume, severs the ends of three bottles in a row.

Champagne fizzes and floods, creamy and white, from the shattered ends of the bottles, spattering the tiled floor in gleaming amber puddles.

Blood makes the same sound when it spurts from the neck.

'Bravo!' Anthony calls, clapping his hands enthusiastically as the other guests begin to applaud. 'Well struck, my good man!'

Hannibal merely sips his drink, but he smiles when the Omega looks to him to share his enjoyment of the stunt.

'So,' Anthony asks, gracefully reaching over and untucking the flap of Hannibal's jacket collar, subtly marking him with his scent. 'What brings you to Paris?'

'Pleasure,' Hannibal replies, the red rings around his irises thickening when Anthony's scent sharpens with desire. 'I'm a connoisseur of beauty.'

'Well, Paris certainly has a great many beautiful things,' Anthony agrees, and he collects another two flutes of champagne. 'Did you…?'

'Oh, one's enough for me,' Hannibal says, lifting his own glass to his lips but pausing before he takes a sip. 'I prefer to savor the taste.'

'I'm more of a gulp it down and go back for seconds bloke myself,' Anthony teases, and Hannibal wets his lips.

'Nothing wrong with enthusiasm.' He keeps an eye on Roman Fell, who continues to hold forth to his admirers, but gives Anthony enough of his attention to make the Omega believe he has him rapt. 'What about you? What brings an unbonded Omega to *une ville d'amour?'*

Anthony chuckles, his cheeks pinkening again in a truly delightful blush.

'"The City of Love",' he muses, draining one of his glasses. 'That's a good name for Paris.' He shrugs one shoulder and almost ruffles the back of his hair before he remembers he's holding something. 'Well, I decided to go travelling after I finished my PhD at Cambridge,' he says. 'See the wonders of Europe… Gain inspiration for my poetry…'

'Avoid an unwanted mating?' Hannibal offers, and Anthony rolls his eyes in droll agreement.

'My grandmother's idea,' he explains. 'My parents are more… *liberal*, but, being Betas, the guardianship falls to the closest living Alpha.'

'I wasn't aware of that,' Hannibal replies, his traitorous mind returning to Will and his Beta father… Had Will's guardianship always been a thing of question? Had his mother, the elusive Alpha – as she surely must have been – actually had the guardianship of her Omegan son all along?

‘It’s an antiquated law,’ Anthony sighs. ‘One of the few like it left in England.’

‘It sounds as though your country is more progressive, generally speaking,’ Hannibal offers, and Anthony smiles fondly.

‘It is,’ he agrees. ‘Not like *America*.’ He scoffs. ‘I swear, most of the states in that country are stuck in the Dark Ages when it comes to Omegan rights and liberties.’

‘I wouldn’t know,’ Hannibal says mildly, the lie flowing smoothly past his lips to the ears of his companion. ‘I’ve never been.’

‘Well, you’re not missing much,’ Anthony assures him, making a start on his full glass. ‘Europe is definitely the place to be an Omega.’

‘These days, at least,’ Hannibal replies, and Anthony tilts his head curiously. Hannibal finishes the rest of his champagne and hums his satisfaction. ‘The Medieval times were particularly difficult for Omegas,’ he explains. ‘That, and the Culling of 1878.’

Anthony gives a visible shudder and gulps the bubbling wine, making himself choke. Hannibal smiles and pats him on the back, helping him cough the liquid from his lungs. As he does, he tips his head to the Omega’s curls, inhaling the scent of him, and Anthony visibly relaxes beside him, a low purr lingering in the air between them.

‘I’m not looking for a mate,’ he says quickly, glancing up through his lashes at the taller Alpha. ‘Just a little fun.’

‘You’re certain to find fun,’ Hannibal murmurs, reaching out and pushing a gray-streaked curl of hair behind Anthony’s ear. ‘Though your body will require you to settle down soon.’

Anthony’s eyes flash gold and he scowls at the reminder of his own frailty. He makes to push Hannibal’s hand away and ends up covering the fingers, holding his palm to his cheek.

‘I hate that I don’t have a choice,’ he says. ‘I want to mate because I love someone, not because my body dictates it.’

‘We all have burdens to bear,’ Hannibal replies. ‘And you’ve done remarkably well to remain unbonded for as long as you have.’

Anthony gives a shaky sigh and then manages a grin. He steps back, breaking the spell, and lifts his remaining champagne to toast.

‘For as long as I have.’

***

They spend the rest of the party together. Anthony is fine company; sophisticated and intelligent, with a sharp tongue and endless anecdotes of the social elite with whom they mingle.

But, at the end of the night, Hannibal declines to join him in his hotel room.

‘I have a dinner this evening,’ he says, noting the way Dr Fell has begun to sway on his mate’s arm, eyes bloodshot and bleary from too much champagne. ‘How about tomorrow?’

Anthony slips a napkin into Hannibal’s jacket pocket, his number scribbled across the front in eyeliner, borrowed from an obliging Omega in the loos.

‘Don’t delay,’ he warns, golden eyes sparkling. ‘You’re not the only attractive Alpha in the city.’

‘Until tomorrow, then,’ Hannibal replies, and he presses a chaste kiss to the back of Anthony’s hand, eliciting another delicious blush from the younger man. ‘*Bonsoir, mon cher.’*

‘Enjoy your dinner,’ Anthony says, giving him a lighthearted shove, and Hannibal’s grin shows his fangs.

‘Oh,’ he purrs, his eyes glowing. ‘I *shall*.’

***

He waits for Roman Fell outside the hotel. Anthony remains inside, no doubt charming another man into sharing his bed, and Hannibal straddles his motorcycle, his body tingling with adrenaline, mind calm as a millpond and heartbeat steady.

This is what I am. A hunter. An Apex predator.

When the other Alpha wanders towards him, resplendent in his evening coat and white scarf, Hannibal allows his eyes to flash crimson.

‘*Bonsoir*,’ he calls, his voice rough with pre-Rut hormones.

Roman pauses, frowning in confusion, and gives a vague wave in return.

‘*Bonsoir*…?’

Hannibal lets him go and then, as Roman falls into the back of a taxi, he slides his helmet over his head.

Let’s find out where you live, shall we?

***

The journey is brief, and Roman is still perfectly inebriated when they arrive. Hannibal parks in the courtyard, cutting the engine and removing his helmet as the drunk Alpha quibbles over two Euros’ change.

Thieving bastard, Roman thinks, grumbling to himself under his breath as he crosses the road to his apartment. *Probably a Beta; they’re all grubby, money-stealing –*

The sight of the leather-clad Alpha from earlier, now resting back against his motorcycle with arms crossed, makes him pause. The other man is oddly still, his eyes deep red, face serene

but muscles taut.

‘Bonsoir…?’ Roman offers, his sense of dread quickly escalating into terror as the Alpha straightens and says, with irises flooding Rut-red,

‘*Bonsoir*.’

***

The apartment is exquisite, and Dr Fell has an impressive collection of operatic vinyl records, which Hannibal plays as he gives the kitchen a thorough clean before cooking.

The rich tones of Don Pasquale’s: *Sogno Soave E Casto* fill the air, accompanying the sizzle of melting butter.

Hannibal fries off Roman’s liver, seasoning it with garlic and fresh thyme. He dishes himself a portion, nestled amidst finely chopped potatoes and Chantilly carrots, and has just settled down to eat when the front door to the apartment opens.

Lydia Fell lets herself in, wearing a fine silk dress, high heels and a velvet coat from her night at the theatre. Roman should be home; he’d taken Gabrielle to the gathering tonight, allowing her to join her parents for dinner and a show, but she’s glad to be with him again.

The rich scent of a fine cooked meal wafts through on the warm air, and Lydia smiles. Gabrielle must be here, and have ordered something from their favorite restaurant; she’ll have a plate and join them in the bedroom.

When she enters the dining room, however, she sees, not Roman but an invading Alpha. The man is sandy-haired, with cruel lips and dark eyes. He’s wearing riding gear; a black sweater and leather trousers, and his long fingers wield the cutlery – *their* cutlery – with ease.

Roman’s not here, she thinks, but she can smell her Alpha, thick and strong, and her golden eyes drop to the plate of food, where her mate’s scent rises on the steam from the organ. *But… that’s not possible…*

Is it?

Hannibal lifts his head, his irises warming to crimson as Lydia’s confusion spirals into terror. His muscles coil, preparing to attack, and he smiles.

‘Bonsoir.’

***

Almost a year ago, Hannibal had served Abel Gideon his left leg cooked in clay. That had been their first dinner together; the Ripper and his Impersonator.

As Hannibal dresses for an evening of celebration with the finest scholars in Florence, he allows his mind to wander back to their second meal.

Abel's mind had begun to slip from reality, cracking under the pressure of constant fear as I took him apart, limb by limb.

Wheeling his silver trolley into the dining room of his Baltimore townhouse, Hannibal had smirked at the glassy-eyed Alpha in pride of place at the head of the table, pitiful as ever in his bathrobe and pajamas, with two bandaged stumps where his legs had been and a higher dose of morphine in the drip.

'You really *are* the Devil,' Abel had whispered, rolling bloodshot eyes up at him as Hannibal had revealed the dish from beneath the domed lid – the whole leg, minus a foot, glazed and marinated until the scent of candy-apples and pork filled the air.

But it's not pork.

'You certainly seem to enjoy it,' the weaker Alpha had added, almost managing a disapproving tone. 'You have a *click* in your *hoof*.'

'The Devil has been a yoke around the neck of humanity since we first began to think and dream,' Hannibal had replied, drizzling a treacle sauce onto the meat. *'I* for a much shorter time.'

'You admit the yoke.' Abel had rolled his eyes and then made a show of scenting the air. 'Smells of candy apples and thyme,' he'd offered, frowning up at Hannibal. 'You *smoked* me in thyme.'

'Smoked,' Hannibal had confirmed, lifting a perfect cube of skewered leg from the display. 'Glazed, and served on a sugar cane quill.' He'd set the portion on Abel's plate, alongside the vine-leaf tomatoes and leaned down to add in a purr, 'You'll be falling off the bone.'

'Well, of *course*.' Abel's fear-drenched tongue had run away with him, making him snappy. He'd fumbled to find his way back to a semblance of control; an illusion, but an interesting challenge for Hannibal, and so permitted. 'And, with these rarified dishes you so carefully prepare,' the broken Alpha had continued, 'do we all *taste* different?'

Hannibal, sitting himself beside his dinner guest, had unfolded his napkin and laid it over his lap to protect his suit.

'Everyone has their flavor.'

'Cannibalism was standard behavior among our ancestors,' Abel had announced, as though imparting a peal of wisdom. 'The missing link was only missing because we *ate* him.'

Hannibal, however, had merely cut into his meat and smiled at the other man.

'This isn't cannibalism,' he'd replied. 'It's only cannibalism if we're equals.'

And you will never be my equal.

What that, he'd placed the forkful of flesh onto his tongue and chewed, savoring the balanced flavors and moist texture.

Abel had looked quite nauseated at the sight.

‘It’s only cannibalism if you eat *me*,’ he’d said, arguing to be acknowledged an equal. ‘But you just feel this is the natural order of things. Everybody gets ate.’

‘Be he fat or be he lean,’ Hannibal had agreed, reaching for his wine – a fruity Shiraz to balance the heavy, sweet flavor of the meat.

‘With my last leg standing next to me,’ Abel had mused, clearly allowing himself the impulse to talk *incessantly* as a coping mechanism for his fear; ‘I *should* still wrestle with the urges to fight or flee.’

‘It’s called “terminal restlessness”,’ Hannibal had advised, watching the other Alpha’s veins stand proud in his neck, his pulse racing beneath the pale skin. ‘The body fills with adrenaline and feels compelled to go-go-go.’ He’d grinned, his irises flashing red, and Abel had huffed in frustration.

‘“Go-go-go”?’ He’d jerked his head towards the leg on the serving trolley. ‘I’ve already got up and *gone*.’ He’d gestured to the plate. ‘*This* is *posthumous.’*

‘You’re not dead yet, Abel,’ Hannibal had warned, allowing a little of his irritation to sharpen his voice. ‘You still have to eat.’

I remember thinking; is this how it will feel to reprimand our children at the table? Will I have to chivvy and coax them into finishing their dinner?

‘No…’ Abel had shaken his head. ‘I don’t.’ As Hannibal had continued eating, he’d picked up his cube of meat by the quill and inspected it from upside down, mouth twisting in distaste. ‘At this point, there’s absolutely *nothing* I *have* to do.’

He’d dumped the dish back onto the china and grimaced, wiping sticky fingers clean on his bandages.

‘But, I shouldn’t *spoil* the fairytale, should I?’ A blank stare had accompanied that, and Hannibal’s heart had soared at the despair to which his victim had begun to sink, seeking comfort in the desperate belief that it was all imaginary. ‘You and your little gingerbread-house family…’

My gingerbread-house family… The perfect Omega and two perfect children… Abigail and our baby…

A year ago, Hannibal had set his cutlery aside, clasped his hands together and regarded Abel Gideon coolly. Tonight, he regards his own reflection with the same dispassion.

‘Let it be a fairytale, then,’ he murmurs, reaching up to adjust his bowtie and straightening the cufflinks of his shirt. ‘Once upon a time…’

***

The ballroom is filled with the jaunty, charismatic notes of a string quartet playing Beethoven, and dozens of pairs of dancing Alphas and Omegas fill the floor. The prosecco flows freely and spirits soar, for the *Palazzo Capponi* has gathered here tonight to share the news on whether or not their latest applicant will join their ranks as Curator.

Hannibal, resplendent in his tuxedo, holds Will close as they twirl across the marble tiles. Will can't help but look down every few steps, muttering the one-two-three beat under his breath to keep from tripping or stepping on his Alpha's toes. His post-pregnancy body is as trim as ever and his waist is accentuated by the cut of the Omegan tuxedo, though his crest is hidden away beneath the collar, unlike most of the other claiming scars in the room.

'Just breathe,' Hannibal murmurs, grinning at him when Will's eyes flash gold and he glares at being spun around and brought back in close. 'You're doing perfectly, *mylimasis*.'

'Should've taken more lessons,' Will grumbles, but he can't help feeling a flicker of pride as he matches Hannibal step for step in the next verse, keeping up with him until the very last second when the Alpha then decides to spin, turn and bend him backwards over his arm.

Hannibal openly laughs when Will fights the dramatic gesture, and quickly rights him before the struggling man makes him lose his grip and drop him. Will gets his feet under him and gives Hannibal a shove, his cheeks flushed red and mouth a pinched line.

'*Bellissimo*,' Hannibal purrs, gazing with open adoration at his fierce, furious mate. The compliment, and the heat in his Alpha's eyes when he stares at him, has Will blushing again, though he calms himself down and settles for straightening his shirt and jacket. He shakes his head when Hannibal collects a glass of wine from a passing waiter and offers it to him, and takes half a step back so that the taller man is in front of him when the *Capponi* scholars approach, en-masse.

'Dr Fell.' Professor Sogliato's black eyes flash red and he gives Hannibal an oily smile, barely able to contain his distaste for the other Alpha. 'I hope you translate as well as you waltz.' He reaches for Will's hand and bows over it, pressing a kiss to the knuckles. 'Mr Fell.'e

'Our new appointee was confirmed by the board,' Mr Albizzi announces, flanked by the remaining members of the *Capponi*, each of them Alphas of various rank and status. 'After *close* questioning.' He smiles, pointedly, at Sogliato, but the younger Alpha is unashamed of his rebuke. e

'You've examined him in medieval Italian,' he says, holding Hannibal's gaze without fear. 'And I will not deny his language is…' He looks the other man up and down. '*Admirable*.'

'Thank you,' Hannibal says, his dark shadow bristling at the hostility in Sogliato's tone as the smaller Alpha adds, rudely,

'For a *straniero*.'

Foreigner. Outsider. Lesser Alpha.

The meaning is clear, and Will places a calming hand on Hannibal's elbow, attempting to soothe him as he feels the flash of fury at being so openly insulted by his peers.

Sogliato, it seems, is intent on digging his own grave as he continues,

'Are you familiar with the personalities of pre-*Renaissance* Florence?' He smiles coolly, even as his eyes blaze crimson. 'I think not.' He turns to his colleagues and adds, loudly, 'Dr Fell might hold in his hand, his *non-Italian* hand, a note from Dante Alghieri himself. Would he recognize it?'

As Hannibal sips prosecco, he focuses all of his attention on the vanilla-musk scent of his Omega and the fizz of bubbles on his tongue, allowing Sogliato his little farce.

Sogliato smirks at him again and finishes, condescendingly,

'I think not.'

You're not one of us.

'Professor Sogliato,' Will says, stepping forwards to distract the other man before Hannibal launches himself at his throat, then and there, in front of everyone. 'Would you do me the honor of a dance?'

I'll step on his toes, he tells Hannibal, but his Alpha is too enraged to catch the thought.

'Of course.' Soglioto takes Will by the arm and begins leading him away, purring softly at his own wit, when Hannibal's voice rings out from behind them.

'Allegro mi sembrava Amor, tenendo meo core in mano.'

Sogliato pauses, turning back in surprise at Hannibal's daring, his confidence, and the skill with which he speaks the Italian words.

'E ne le braccia avea Madonna involta in un drappo dormendo.' Hannibal turns to the assembled crowd, continuing, *'Poi la svegliava, e d'esto core ardeno, lei paventosa umilmente pascea.'*

Pompous ass, Will warns, raising an eyebrow at Hannibal as his Alpha steps closer to them, the words aimed directly at Sogliato, in dramatic rebuke of his denunciation.

'Appreso gir lo ne vedea piangendo.'

A little silence follows, and Hannibal smiles around at his audience.

'Dante's first sonnet,' he informs them, accepting a bow of admiration from Mr Albizzi. 'It fascinated Cavalcanti. The eating of the heart is a powerful image.'

And an even more powerful act of dominance.

Will eyes him warily, sensing the dark, playful anger bubbling with his Alpha. It's the sort of anger that makes Hannibal reckless.

Sogliato bristles at the insult to his intellect.

'If he's such an *expert* on Dante, then let him *lecture* on Dante,' he snaps. 'To the Studiolo.'

Hannibal turns to Mr Albizzi, shrugging casually at the challenge.

'Let him face them,' Sogliato adds, coldly smug. '*Extempore*.'

'I'm happy to sing for my supper,' Hannibal replies, and the echo of Grutas's words sends a chill down Will's spine.

He'll sing for his supper, but he'll make you suffer for it afterwards.

'Professor.' Will tugs on the Alpha's arm, leading him away before anymore damage can be done to their life in Florence.

Hannibal, pleased with himself over his victory, sips his wine and turns back to the scholars to accept his applause. He'll allow Will to distract Professor Sogliato with one dance, and then they shall spend the rest of the evening together. They have the babysitter until midnight, after all, and he wants to take full advantage of the time alone with his mate.

If only it were real.

***

The fantasy continues into the evening. After the ball, Hannibal and Will take a taxi back to their apartment; a glittering array of rooms with views of the River Arno from every eastern window. They pay the babysitter a handful of euros, drop gentle kisses onto Abigail's and the baby's foreheads, and then retire into the living room to sip brandy and share the silence with each other.

'We are among the palaces built six *hundred* years ago,' Hannibal murmurs, gazing out at the beautiful architecture of his beloved city; 'by the merchant princes, the king-makers and the connivers of Renaissance Florence.'

'There are connivers of modern Florence,' Will replies, stepping up beside him and handing him a glass of *grappa*. He has removed his jacket and tie, and his shirtsleeves are rolled up to expose the creamy, tanned skin of his forearms.

Hannibal smiles and looks past him to complement his appearance within the room. The apartment is lavish, with frescoed walls and ceilings of cherubs and devils, ornate brass-work and windows leaded from centuries past.

'I've found a peace here I would preserve,' he admits, sipping his drink. 'I've killed hardly anybody during our residence.'

‘You created a vacancy at the *Palazzo Capponi*,’ Will points out, undoing the top two buttons of his shirt. ‘By removing the former Curator.’

‘A simple process,’ Hannibal brags. ‘Requiring a few second’s work on the old man. And,’ he adds, as an afterthought; ‘a modest outlay for two bags of cement.’

‘You no longer have *ethical* concerns, Hannibal.’ Will shakes his head and sips his own drink, relishing the ability to quiet his mind with alcohol once again. The forced sobriety of his pregnancy had been wearing. ‘You have *aesthetical* ones.’

‘Ethics become aesthetics,’ Hannibal muses, tipping his head back to admire the painting on the ceiling above them.

‘You seem more interested in *making* appearances than maintaining them,’ Will growls, turning back to his Alpha with glowing eyes. He’s protecting their family, after all. If Hannibal makes too much of a scene, the FBI will find them and their fantasy life together will be ruined.

‘If this is about my position at the *Palazzo*,’ Hannibal says, ‘once the path was cleared, I won the job fairly. On my merits.’

Will rolls his eyes and set his brandy aside. He unbuttons the rest of his shirt, dragging the zipper of his pants down with a sound that is too loud in the suddenly brittle silence between them.

The blade went deep.

‘Yes,’ Will sneers, ‘even the most *contentious* Florentines can’t resist the verse of Dante ringing off the frescoed walls.’ He heads for the bathroom, swaying slightly, his head fuzzier than he’d expected.

Has Hannibal drugged me again, or am I just not used to alcohol after the pregnancy?

Hannibal watches him go, his eyes flashing red as he replies,

‘One contentious Florentine *can*.’

Will perches on the edge of the tub, turning the fish-shaped handles to fill it to the brim with hot water. He can sense Hannibal behind him, lingering in the doorway, brandy snifter still in hand and eyes locked onto the strip of skin exposed between Will’s shirt collar and hairline.

If I hadn’t Cut you, you’d still have a crest there, now.

‘Have you given serious thought to *eating* Professor Sogliato?’ Will asks, tugging Hannibal back into the fantasy.

Hannibal considers the question before he replies,

‘My killing Sogliato now would not preserve the peace.’

‘Your *peace* is without morality,’ Will argues, adding scented oil to the water, but Hannibal merely shrugs at him, knowing he is reflected in the big mirror above the sink.

‘Morality doesn’t exist,’ he says. ‘Only morale.’

‘How you feel today…’ Will scoffs, disdainful of the Alpha’s hedonistic lifestyle. As he checks the water temperature again, Hannibal tilts his head and narrows his eyes.

‘How do *you* feel today?’ he asks, testing his mate’s loyalty.

You failed once before… Don’t fail me again.

Will pauses, giving the question due consideration as he toes off his shoes.

‘I still believe I’m in conscious control of my actions,’ he replies, and throws Hannibal a flirtatious, furious glance over his shoulder as he turns the taps off. ‘Given our *history* that’s a good day.’

He stands up and sheds the rest of his outfit; shirt, tie, pants, boxers and socks, all abandoned on the tiled floor. He can feel Hannibal’s eyes on his back, locked onto the ragged scar where his crest used to be, and he shivers as he dips each foot into the scalding water, sinking down until it covers him to his jaw.

Hannibal wanders away, leaving Will alone with nothing but the drip of water and the beating of his own heart. In the ensuing silence, his isolation becomes more and more oppressive, and Will’s mind begins to wander, drifting away on the eddies of steam curling from the surface of the bath.

Is this real? Am I really here?

He cut me deep.

Will floats in nothingness, anchorless and lost… It’s pleasant for a moment, to be utterly without consciousness, and then the water closes in on him, tight as a strap. Will’s neck flares with pain, even as razors slide through his skull.

I’m still in conscious control of my actions… Today is a good day… You were supposed to leave… Hannibal…

‘We’re losing him…’ A distant voice… Male… Worried… It cuts through the dream and Will becomes certain he can hear the blip of a heart monitor. ‘10ccs of Phenobarbital… Increase the nuchal pressure… Will, can you hear me? Will? Can you –?’

Will takes a deep breath and dips beneath the surface of the bath. Water flows up his nose, into his ears… It batters his eyelids, drowning him. He feels like he’s dying; his lungs are burning, too small for his body. His stomach cramps and all he tastes is blood.

There was so much blood…

As Bedelia Du Maurier jerks upright in her bath of water, gasping for air after submerging herself in an unconscious attempt to commit suicide, Hannibal sinks onto a chaise lounge in the bedroom, cradling his burning throat. His legs are shaking, his knees weak; he feels as wrecked as he did the night that he Cut Will.

He'd indulged himself a little fantasy; pretending his companion for the evening had been his Omegan mate, rather than sleek, well-bred Bedelia. Now, as the dream collapses, his bones ache and his throat sears with hot agony; a long strip where his Alphan crest used to be.

I miss him.

There are no children in the apartment. No baby in the nursery; no teenager in the second bedroom. The vanilla-scented musk lingering in the air is the perfume Hannibal bought for Bedelia; he insists she wear it, for as long as she accompanies him. A reminder of his Omega's scent, but she is no substitute for Will.

Love makes fools of us all, Hannibal thinks. He forces himself to gulp back the rest of his brandy, refusing to surrender to the emotions wringing such vile physical sensations from his body. He severed his connections to Will and their life together when he severed the crest on his Omega's nape, and he'll be *damned* if he's going to dwell on it, now.

Another brandy might help. That, and a hypodermic needle filled with tranquilizer.

Anything to stop this *feeling*.

***

When Jack Crawford had brought Bedelia Du Maurier in for questioning, he'd been both impressed and repulsed by her poise.

So, he'd thought, gazing at the blonde-haired Alpha across the table from him; *this is Hannibal Lecter's psychiatrist*.

'If you think you're about to catch Hannibal,' Bedelia had said, her voice smooth as molasses, even as her blue eyes flashed red with fear. 'It's because he *wants* you to think that. Don't fool yourself into thinking he's not in control of what's happening.'

He's always in control… That's why he always wins.

She goes home the moment she's released. Rain has drenched the roads and driveway, and the windows of the house glisten with drops of water, even now, hours after the storm.

Bedelia's key is the only thing to have unlocked the front door, but she still pauses when she crosses the threshold, her spine tingling and all the fine hairs standing on end.

He's here.

She takes a deep breath, and then another, her Rut-red eyes picking out the shapes of furniture in the gloom. Nothing down here has been disturbed, but Hannibal's scent hangs in the still air, coppery with blood.

He's not come to kill me, she thinks, going into her sitting room, where the couches and tables are draped with plastic sheets, and her decanter remains, untouched, on the silver serving tray. *He'd already been waiting if he was.*

Bedelia pours herself three fingers of whiskey, the finest single malt, and takes a large drink before collecting her gun and following her former patient's scent upstairs.

In the bedroom.

Washing blood away is easy, but the scents still cling to him.

Hannibal tilts his face into the shower spray, clawing off the dead and crusted skin of his crest, the scar in its wake an abomination of silky smooth flesh.

I expected to have more emotions, he thinks, scrubbing his bruised and battered body with Bedelia's sponge, her jasmine soap an irritating assault on his nose. *But I don't feel anything.*

Perhaps he shouldn't be surprised. After all, his connection to Will was abnormal; unexpected and unintentional. Quickly severed and now, seemingly, forgotten.

It's what makes me such a successful hunter.

Once every drop of blood has been washed down the drain, Hannibal switches off the shower and steps out into the foggy bathroom. His injuries will heal; his ribs are bruised, not broken, and he's already realigned his nose. He assesses the damage with a clinician's dispassion. Catalogues the effects and deems himself suitable for travel.

He will survive. He always survives.

As he steps out of the bathroom, dabbing at his eyebrows with the towel, Hannibal hears the familiar click of a gun being cocked, and smells the sharp, acrid tang of a scared Alpha.

Bedelia.

His former psychiatrist perches on the end of her bed, dressed in her skirt, blouse and coat from earlier, a whiskey in one hand and a revolver in the other.

Hannibal takes a final breath of his own scent – the last of Will's blood still clinging to his pores – and then looks over at his former psychiatrist with a sigh.

'May I get dressed?' he asks, unashamedly naked before her.

Bedelia's eyes flash red with hunger, quickly tempered by nerves, and she swallows before replying,

'You may.'

Hannibal folds the towel, doing nothing to hide his physique from her.

‘What have you *done*, Hannibal?’ Bedelia asks, resignedly, and Hannibal shrugs as he pulls on the boxer-briefs from the bag he had previously stored in Bedelia’s kitchen pantry.

One can never have too many hiding places.

‘I’ve taken off my person suit,’ he replies, snapping the elastic waistband into position.

‘You let them see you,’ Bedelia says, and she understands the gravity of the revelation. Hannibal sighs through his aching nose as he bends again to retrieve a pair of trousers.

‘I let them see enough.’

And it was too much for them all. Even Will. My sweet Will. I really thought he was different.

‘How does it feel?’ Bedelia asks, gentle over the clink of the belt buckle. ‘Being seen?’

She knows… She knows Will rejected me.

Hannibal swallows, his throat uncomfortably tight, and growls,

‘Well, you’re in no position to ask, Dr Du Maurier.’ He smirks coldly. ‘You ended our patient-psychiatrist relationship.’

‘I lacked the appropriate skills to continue your therapy,’ Bedelia explains, her brow creased. She sees him, now, for who he truly is; there is no one who could help him. He isn’t lost to the darkness; he *is* darkness himself.

‘I never found you to be lacking,’ Hannibal says, easing his bruised and battered body into a fine cotton shirt. He winces at the beating he’s taken, the pain made all the more unbearable by the gaping hole where his heart used to be.

Will cut that out of me, as surely as I cut our future from his womb.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t provide you with a suitable substitute for therapy,’ Bedelia says, sharp eyes noting the angry scar on Hannibal’s exposed throat; the scar of a former Alphan crest. She swallows. ‘Is Will Graham… still alive?’

Hannibal focuses on buttoning his shirt, his fingers trembling.

‘Will Graham was not a suitable substitute for therapy,’ he replies, and Bedelia smells the salt of his distress at the question. Still, she needs to know. She needs to know exactly what she’s dealing with.

‘What was he?’ she asks, and Hannibal, as expected, skirts the question he doesn’t like.

‘Is this professional curiosity?’ he asks, avoiding the trauma of his emotions as surely as he continues to avoid the trauma of his sister’s murder, all those years ago.

Bedelia sighs. He is not further along now than he was when they first met, almost ten years ago.

‘Almost entirely.’

Hannibal looks at her, watching her as she watches him. They assess each other; the hunter and its prey… His eyes take on the same dead, flat look as before, and he walks closer, finished with buttoning his shirt.

‘Do you trust me?’ he asks, staring at her with his veil down and monster revealed. Bedelia smiles at her own shiver of repulsion.

‘Not entirely,’ she admits, and Hannibal nods with a smile. He buttons his cuffs as he continues,

‘Are you taking into consideration my beliefs about your intentions?’

Are you gambling your safety on my need to flee?

‘My intentions?’ Bedelia raises an eyebrow, feigning ignorance, and Hannibal scoffs.

‘Motivation can be little more than lucid greed,’ he explains, and Bedelia chokes on a frightened laugh.

‘Greed?’

It’s greedy to want to protect myself? Save my own life?

‘And blind optimism?’ she adds.

‘You’re optimistic I won’t kill you,’ Hannibal says. Bedelia, to confirm, uncocks the gun and sets it on the bed beside her.

Hannibal stares at her for another moment, his expression unreadable, and then he turns and walks back into the bathroom to get ready.

He won’ kill me, Bedelia thinks, taking a shuddering gulp of whiskey at so narrowly avoiding death, again. *Not yet.*

***

It rains for the next three days. Hannibal goes to work, leaving Will at home with Abigail and the baby, free to do whatever they please, as long as Will goes for the bi-weekly food shop.

Dressed in dark jeans, boots and a fine blue coat, he takes the tube and then walks across the damp square of the Piazza del Duomo, his face shielded from surveillance cameras by his umbrella. His destination, Hannibal has instructed, is the little artisan deli, *Vera Dal 1926,* which sits, tucked away, down a cobbled side street off the Piazza.

Only the finest for our family, mylimasis.

The brass bell tinkles above the door, announcing his arrival, and Will shakes rain off the brolly as he folds it down at the doorstep. He wanders around slowly, taking in the pheasants

and other game birds lying, freshly killed, on the counters, waiting to be plucked and matured in the back; the bowls of fresh grapes and glistening olives on the counter, the array of cheeses and cured meats…

The shop is small but the prices are steep; every item is a luxury, which is why Hannibal chooses to shop here and few other places for the ingredients he requires for their meals.

The order is very specific, and Will has it memorized.

'*Due bottiglie di Bâtard-Montrachet e tartufi bianchi, per favore,'* he says, his Italian flawless; just the way Hannibal taught him.

Two bottles of *Bâtard-Montrachet* and a dozen white truffles. It has been the same every week since they arrived in Florence; it compliments the oysters and acorns of Will's post-pregnancy diet.

The shopkeeper, a kindly, elderly Alpha, smiles gently at him as he packages the precious items into a tissue-lined paper bag, and Will offers him a grimace in return. He loathes the extravagance of the shop, the pomp and ritual of the sale, and he leaves as soon as he can; eager to return to the apartment to spend time with his family.

At least, Hannibal thinks, as he pores over old manuscripts at his desk in the Palazzo Capponi; *that's what I like to believe.*

He would much rather have his Omega running errands for him than Bedelia, though her Italian is, undoubtedly, far superior. Sitting amongst the cruel and twisted iron of Medieval torture instruments, he immerses himself instead in Dante's early works, finding additional reference to the eating of the burning heart, and other sonnets of lost love.

My own heart burned for you, Will. Now it is little more than a charred husk.

The room is beautiful; vaulted ceilings painted with heavenly scenes, a mahogany floor and marble balconies. Glass cases rise from the ground, just like the dunking tanks of the cells inside Baltimore's Insane Asylum's visiting room.

Irony can be cruel.

It is only after his day is done, his notes complete and his essay for Friday night written, that Hannibal leaves for home. He buttons the double-breasted jacket of his sandstone-colored suit and skips down the stairs to the foyer, his briefcase clasped beneath his left arm, face swiftly upturned to the dying rays of the evening sunshine.

If only Will was waiting for me at home.

The clouds soon reassert their dominance, however, just in time for a familiar, British-accented voice to hail him from across the courtyard.

'Hello!' Anthony Dimmond waves to him, quickly abandoning the elderly Alpha to whom he had been speaking. 'Bonjour!'

The Omega, still wearing a pattern scarf and his navy frock coat, shakes enthusiastically with Hannibal, frowning and smiling in bemusement at the sight of him. Hannibal can feel how stiff his face has become; he hadn't expected to run into Mr Dimmond again, and certainly not so soon.

Yes, if only Will was waiting for me at home.

'Mr Jakov, isn't it?' Anthony continues. 'We met in Paris a few months back. Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you, it's just here I was and then there you were…' He chuckles at himself and tucks his hands inside his trouser pockets. 'I never forget a face. *Especially* a handsome one.'

'Anthony Dimmond.' Hannibal inclines his head with a purr and a flash of crimson eyes; a reward for the compliment, and Anthony grins at the praise.

'Nice to be remembered,' he says, his blue eyes warming to gold. Hannibal smiles, all charm now that he has recovered.

'You're hard to forget.'

Harder still, it seems, to avoid.

'What are you doing in Florence?' Anthony asks, frowning once more in puzzlement. 'Are you working with Roman?'

'Dr Fell?' Hannibal feigns ignorance, wondering how much the wayward Omega knows.

How dangerous he is.

'Mm.' Anthony nods his head. 'I heard he took an appointment at the Capponi Library.'

I did.

'Yes,' Hannibal confirms. 'He's the new curator and translator at the Palazzo Capponi.'

Anthony's smile becomes ever more mischievous.

'Evidently, the last one eloped with another Alpha's omega, or their money, or both.'

'That's the commonly-held belief,' Hannibal agrees. It's not true, of course; the Alpha in question is dead and buried, rotting all but for a few choice cuts, which Hannibal has since cooked and eaten. 'You just missed Roman,' he lies, and Anthony pretends to grimace.

'Oh, did I?' He sighs. 'I was hoping to take the piss.' Another grin, warming his whole face, and Hannibal's heart skips a beat.

You remind me so much of Will. What he could have been, had he not chosen to live his life amongst the shadows of monsters.

‘Spare the piss for the time being,’ he says, wondering at his own impulsion as he adds, ‘If you’re free, my mate and I would love to have you for dinner.’

Anthony Dimmond smiles, and slips his arm casually through the crook of Hannibal’s elbow to fall into step beside him.

‘I’d *love* to.’

***

Hannibal had had a few days with Dr Gideon before Will’s return from the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. After removing and serving his legs, he had amputated his arm, hanging it by the wrist with a string of garlic and sweet berries in the gently moistened tank of his cochlear garden in the townhouse basement.

Forcing Dr Gideon to watch, immobile in his electric wheelchair, with his only remaining limb to work the control, Hannibal had bathed the arm in sweet honey and almond milk; a feast for the snails.

When it came time to harvest them, they had resisted the tug on their shells, but Hannibal had simply plucked harder and the creatures came away from the cured flesh with a wet pop.

‘Listen,’ he’d said, his eyes flashing crimson at the resulting wave of fear from the other Alpha. ‘They prefer eating in company.’

As do I. But Will is coming home soon. My family; united.

‘I’ve kept cochlear gardens since I was a young man,’ he’d explained. ‘Fattening snails on herbs and vine leaves. Like all of us, what they eat greatly influences and enhances their flavor.’

Behind him, reflected in the glass, he’d seen Abel frown.

‘So, when I’m not busy *eating myself*,’ the other Alpha had said; ‘you wish me to be eating oysters, drinking sweet wine and snacking on acorns… All to make me *tastier?’*

Hannibal had thrown him a wicked smile over his shoulder, fangs bared and irises blood-red.

‘Oh, *yes*,’ he’d purred. ‘And you are making *them* tastier.’

‘And I you,’ Abel had replied, trying to rankle him. To regain a sliver of control over a hopeless situation. ‘Imagine what *you* must taste like… Won’t be long until someone’s taking a *bite* out of *you*.’

If Will knows anything, he’ll bite me… Bond me… To save himself… He may even kill and eat me…

Repressing a shiver of pleasure at the idea, Hannibal had merely smiled and glanced back down at his bowl of *scutellastra cochlear* snails.

‘You’re becoming brighter, Abel,’ he’d commented. ‘Dying hasn’t dulled you one bit.’

‘The *snails* are certainly having a lovely experience,’ Abel had grumbled. ‘Fattened on me in a red-wine marinade… They have no idea they’re going to be eaten. *We* do.’

‘We all die in the end,’ Hannibal had mused, carefully applying the marinade to the fingertips and palm of the hand. ‘Death is only a waste if it has no benefit.’

Abel had hummed, and, then, after a moment of silence, turned his wheelchair around to follow Hannibal from the room.

‘Who will benefit from *your* death, I wonder?’

***

‘I’ve brought a guest to dinner,’ Hannibal announces, sauntering into the apartment with Anthony Dimmond on his heels. ‘Anthony, welcome to our home.’

‘What a wonderful family,’ Anthony says, smiling at Abigail holding the baby, and then, after a pause, at Will, who watches warily from the other side of the dining table. ‘I didn’t realize you had children.’

‘We adopted Abigail,’ Hannibal says, giving his daughter’s shoulder a quick squeeze before stroking the baby’s cheeks. ‘And *this* little one is our newest addition.’

‘Have you two been together long?’ Anthony asks, shrugging out of his coat and handing it to Boris. ‘You certainly have the air of a couple well settled into family life.’

There is a current of tension beneath the cheery words. A question of his place at their table.

Am I a welcome guest, or something else?

‘Feels like forever,’ Will mutters, moving to take the baby from Abigail, rocking gently and purring before he looks up and asks, ‘How long have *you two* known each other?’

Hannibal quirks an eyebrow at Will, and says, deliberately,

‘Mr Dimmond and I met in France a few months ago. He’s here to see Dr Fell.’

Dr Fell… The man you murdered… The man you’re currently impersonating…

Will’s chest tightens and his belly cramps. He frowns, feeling like he’s floating inside Hannibal’s head for just a moment, anchorless and lost, before he swiftly returns to the sensations of his own body. His heavy limbs and dry mouth… Rumbling belly and cracked lips.

‘Dr Fell?’ he whispers. ‘I… er…’

‘It was a *dreadfully* dull party,’ Anthony says, drawing closer as Hannibal leaves them alone to hang the coat in the hallway. ‘Boris saved me from an evening of complete boredom.’

‘You’ll never be bored with him around,’ Will agrees, somewhat waspishly, and Anthony chuckles at the other man’s acerbic tongue. He can see why Boris has mated with him; fine features, Renaissance hair and a sharp mind… He’d keep any Alpha on his toes.

He must be an absolute spitfire in the bedroom.

‘Anthony Dimmond,’ Anthony says, officially introducing himself with a handshake. ‘Fellow at Cambridge.’

‘Garrett Jakov,’ Will lies, adjusting the baby to shake with him. ‘This is Daniel.’

‘Daniel… Like the prophet.’ Anthony peers over the edge of the blanket at the sleeping baby and purrs softly. ‘Gorgeous fellow.’

‘Abigail, would you put him down for us?’ Will asks, handing the baby back to her. ‘Are you joining us for dinner?’

Abigail settles Daniel into the crook of her arm, shushing him when he murmurs, and then looks up at them both.

‘Er, well, actually, I was going to go out,’ she admits. ‘To meet some friends.’

‘Of course,’ Hannibal says, before Will has a chance to argue. ‘Be back before midnight.’

And don’t kill anyone, Will thinks sourly, watching her leave with his child. He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose before gulping back his second whiskey of the night. The alcohol is good; it numbs the ache in his abdomen and makes him forget to question how he’s here, why he’s here… How any of this can be real and yet feel like a dream.

‘Now,’ Hannibal says, rubbing his hands together and grinning at the two Omegas before him. ‘Who’s hungry?’

***

The blade slips between the edges, nicking soft muscle and spilling liquid to the floor. Will watches, feeling queasy but unable to remember why he’s so disturbed by the image, as his Alpha cuts open a dozen oysters.

Hannibal pours the saltwater away, presenting the delicacy on perfectly balanced cubes of ice. Will already has a portion, but he may want more, and Hannibal is nothing if not an attentive mate.

Scooping the sweet-wine soaked oyster meat onto his fork, Will dips his head to eat it without making a mess, acutely aware of Anthony’s fascinated smile on his face.

‘So, er… how well do you know the Fells?’ he asks, trying to swallow past the lump in his throat. He doesn’t want Hannibal to kill this man; Anthony seems nice and he’s an innocent in this. His only crime is knowing a previous victim.

Don’t ruin our life here.

‘As well as anybody,’ Anthony replies, shrugging. ‘Which’d be “not really”.’ He grins and lifts a goblet of red wine to his lips. ‘Is Lachlan a friend of yours?’

No… He and Roman are dead, and we’ve taken their identities as our own.

Will shoots a single, disparaging look towards Hannibal, and then turns his attention back to Anthony.

‘Not really.’

‘Well, I’d be surprised to hear if he had one,’ Anthony says, his eyes flickering gold. ‘We share a mutual detestation.’ At Will’s raised eyebrow, he explains, ‘He disapproves of my disapproval.’

Of Roman’s harem of Omegas… His weakened bonds to them all… Gabrielle, his Omega-secondi, who disappeared from Paris shortly after the party… Probably Cut and ready to meet a new Alpha with better prospects. ‘Megs like her are all the same.

Hannibal, as if sensing the thought, glances up from cutting oysters and asks, with a smile,

‘What do you disapprove of?’

‘Roman, mainly,’ Anthony replies, unashamed of his opinion. It is refreshing in a member of his caste. Too many Omegas are downtrodden and silent. ‘Lachlan just isn’t bright enough to see that I’m equal parts jealous and intimidated.’

He grins, his scent thickening, and adds, as if sharing a secret with them both,

‘Roman does, of course. How he *loves* to strike fear.’

‘Dante wrote that fear is almost as bitter as death,’ Hannibal says, bringing the tray of oysters around for Will to take another helping.

‘Dante wasn’t *dead* when he wrote it,’ Will replies, scowling up at his mate as the Alpha serves him another portion of mollusks.

And neither am I.

Hannibal smirks at him, and asks, feigning innocent curiosity as he walks around to take his place across from Will at the table,

‘Are you travelling alone, Anthony?’

‘The only way I travel,’ Anthony replies, grinning at Boris and Garrett’s verbal sparring.

‘Roman is speaking to the *Studiolo* on Friday, on Dante,’ Hannibal says, folding his tie down before picking up his knife and fork. ‘You should come.’

Don’t… Hannibal, please don’t…

Will glances up, his hand trembling as he holds another forkful of oyster flesh ready to consume. He hates the way his Alpha is toying with the Omega; perhaps, especially because it *is* an Omega.

‘Sounds appropriately hellish,’ Anthony teases, unfolding his napkin ready to eat his second course; tender beef liver in a red-wine marinade. He frowns when he realizes that Will is having two courses of fish instead of moving onto the beef. ‘Are you avoiding meats?’

Hannibal glances up, daring him to say anything, and Will’s heart lodges at the base of his throat.

He’s angry that I don’t trust him… He’s going to hurt the baby…

He swallows nervously, and then looks at Anthony.

‘I’m, er… trying not to eat anything with a central nervous system,’ he replies, eating another mouthful.

Anthony sniffs a laugh at the plate.

‘Oysters, acorns and Marsala,’ he says. ‘That’s what ancient Romans would feed animals to improve their flavor.’

Will pauses, trying to chew the suddenly tasteless, rubbery texture on his tongue.

Improving my flavor… He’s going to eat me after all. When? How long am I safe? How long until my flavor has ripened just enough?

He meets Hannibal’s gaze and the Alpha smiles, irises warmed through with burgundy.

You already taste perfect to me, Will.

‘My mate has a very… *sophisticated* palate,’ Will replies, fixing his golden eyes somewhere near Anthony’s chin. ‘He’s very *particular* about how I taste.’

Anthony stares, shocked at the innuendo, and looks to Hannibal for confirmation. Hannibal grins and shrugs, and Anthony chuckles, turning back to Will with a deep purr.

‘Is it that kind of party?’ he teases, and Will looks up, locking eyes with Hannibal, whose energy is playful and boyish, exuberant in his little ploy.

Is it? Do you want to fuck him before you kill him?

‘It might be that kind of party,’ Hannibal says, and Will glares at him.

‘No,’ he growls. ‘It really *isn’t*.’

‘Shame,’ Anthony says, looking from Alpha to Omega. ‘You were both suddenly so *fascinating*.’

Don't play with your food, Will thinks, trying his best to convey his disdain for Hannibal's sadistic games. *It's rude.*

It's rude to disappoint a guest, Hannibal returns, and they both take a sip of their wine, arguing silently whilst Anthony watches, curious, between them.

'Am I missing something?' the Omega asks, gesturing to them both with his fork. 'Your energy is fascinating.'

'You wouldn't be the first person we've invited to join us,' Hannibal explains, eyes still locked onto Will.

'And that never ended *well*,' Will snaps, reminding him of all the death and pain they've caused.

Matthew… Randall… Alana… Abigail.

'Where there's life, there's possibility,' Hannibal says, taking another bite of Lydia Fell's liver. 'Experience shapes us; makes us greater than who we were.'

'And curiosity killed the cat,' Will mutters, stabbing at a roasted acorn and crunching it defiantly. 'Some things are better left unspoken.'

'Bluebeard's wife,' Hannibal murmurs. He gazes at his beloved, maroon eyes soft and brow furrowed in pain. 'Don't you want to know what lies beyond the door, Will?'

Will swallows back a whine of longing and looks up. He sees Hannibal's face, his true face; blank eyes, black skin, skeletally thin and horned… The wendigo of his nightmares, starving and desperate for sensation… A void of humanity, sucking all light and life into it, with no hope of escape.

I loved you… And you broke me.

'I already do.'

***

'*Buonasera*,' Anthony says, waving goodbye to Hannibal at the end of the evening and stepping outside into the hallway of the apartment building.

'*Buonasera*,' Hannibal replies, watching him leave before shutting and bolting the doors behind him. Then, once they are alone, he turns around to look at Will, his hands in the pockets of his trousers, head tilted and face sharply expectant.

'You let him go,' Will says, leaning back against a marble pillar, burgundy shirtsleeves rolled up exposing his tanned forearms.

Hannibal narrows his eyes.

‘What would you have me do?’ he asks, and Will sighs, looking off to the side. When Hannibal goes to walk past him, however, he grabs for the front of his shirt, visible above the top of his waistcoat, and drags him in for a fierce kiss.

Their lips meet, bruising at first and then softening. Tongues gently caress and explore, sharing the taste of sweet wine and the dark chocolate of their dessert. Will moans into the embrace, arching up against Hannibal’s chest as the Alpha’s strong arms close around his waist, hauling him closer.

‘You didn’t want to share,’ Hannibal murmurs, nuzzling along Will’s jaw, nose rasping the hairs of his beard, sucking a blushing bruise over the thundering pulse of his squirming mate.

‘He’s dangerous,’ Will whispers, tugging Hannibal’s face back to his, reclaiming his mouth with his own and fumbling with the buttons of his waistcoat. ‘*You’re* dangerous.’

‘I am,’ Hannibal purrs, copying the action with Will’s shirt. He spreads his warm palms flat over the mounded pectorals of his Omega’s chest, massaging gently as Will moans. Despite the changes in his body, Will’s chest has remained mostly flat; his muscles have adapted, bunching higher before softening to better suit feeding the baby. Hannibal dips his mouth to a dusky nipple, taking the bud gently between his teeth and biting just hard enough to make Will’s breath catch before suckling on the sweet tip.

‘I didn’t really want to share you, either,’ he murmurs, repeating the action on the other nipple before kneeling before his below and kissing a trail down his abdomen. He swirls his tongue into the hollow of Will’s navel, mimicking the action he’d like to do to another, more intimate, part of him, and Will groans his approval of the idea. He bows over Hannibal, hips rocking gently as his Alpha kisses at the damp seam of his pants, winding his fingers through the other man’s soft blond hair and urging him to apply more pressure to his throbbing hardness.

Hannibal uses his teeth to tug the zipper down, grinning up at Will as he undoes the button and spreads the fabric apart. He plucks at the elastic of the Omega’s boxers, making the fabric snap back against Will’s skin, and then tugs them away from the erection he wants to taste.

Will hums at the coolness against his sensitive flesh, smiling and blushing even as his Alpha licks, slowly and deliberately, at the pearly wetness gathering on the tip. The pleasure has a sharpness to it, an ache that gets him behind the balls, and he feels slick wet between his ass cheeks, even as his heart skips a beat.

‘*Delizioso,’* Hannibal purrs, gazing up at him with open adoration. *‘Bellissimo.’*

‘*Mostro*,’ Will whispers, a tear slipping down his cheek when his Alpha’s warm hand spread across the cesarean scar on his belly. ‘You’re killing me.’

‘I’ve only *ever* wanted what’s *best* for you,’ Hannibal says. He rises to his feet and pulls Will after him, leading him into the bedroom. He pushes him down onto the mattress, crawling over his body to cover him with his own. Supports himself on his elbows and devours his mouth, hot breath dampening the air between them.

‘Fuck me,’ Will gasps, throwing his head back in abandon, surrendering to the sensations wrung from him by the other man.

Hannibal’s red eyes lock onto the white column of his throat, offered so freely, and he snarls before locking his teeth into the flesh, biting down on the windpipe with enough force to break the skin.

There was so much blood.

Crimson wells, droplets in each cut left by his teeth. A perfect ring of red, like a posy abandoned on winter snow.

‘Fuck me,’ Will repeats, rearing up to grab Hannibal by the cheeks and drag him back down. The clothes don’t matter; their naked skin slides against each other and sparks fly. Time has no meaning here; they are locked together, connected by more than mere flesh, writhing and bucking together, chasing the flames of orgasm before the crashing white drowns them and they lose this moment.

Did you think you could change me?

‘I did,’ Will whispers, his voice trembling as he presses his cheek to Hannibal’s, screwing his eyes tight shut against the invading daylight, refusing to wake up from this dream, this perfect dream with his mate, his Alpha.

The father of my children.

‘You did,’ Hannibal promises, a sharp cry leaving him as climax overwhelms him. He arches his spine, thrusting his hips forward as far as possible, spilling his seed inside his mate before his knot locks them together.

Forever.

‘Stay with me,’ he begs, stroking Will’s damp curls back from his ashen face, despising the look of pain and betrayal on such beautiful features. ‘Stay with me.’

Stay with us, Will… Stay with us… That’s it…

‘I…’ Will feels his eyes slide shut, the lids too heavy to move, limbs too weak to support him as he floats back into emptiness. ‘I trusted you.’

And you trusted me.

‘Will!’

Hannibal’s cry rings out into the empty bedroom of the Florentine apartment, echoing from the frescoed walls. His chest heaves, his heart thundering and cheeks wet with tears from his dream.

Just a dream… It was just a dream.

He swings his bare legs out of bed and covers his face in his hands, blocking out the encroaching dawn.

Why can't I stop thinking about him?

***

On Friday morning, Bedelia Du Maurier makes the same trip that Hannibal imagines Will would make for him, entering the artisan deli in a turquoise hat, navy coat and green scarf.

'*Due bottiglie di Bâtard-Montrachet e tartufi bianchi, per favore.'*

A rabbit, freshly killed, hangs on a hook where the pheasant had previously been. As Bedelia watches, her stomach writhing, another drop of blood falls from its nose to land with a sickening splash into the congealing puddle on the flagstone floor.

The shopkeeper places the paper bag on the counter before her, and Bedelia collects it with a faint,

'*Grazi*,' before escaping into the dully, overcast day.

She doesn't go home immediately. Instead, defying Hannibal's orders, she goes to the train station, where she sits on a bench with the *Vera Dal 1926* bag beside her, label clearly visible to the security cameras. Her profile is obvious but, just in case, she turns after a moment and stares straight at the lens.

Come and find us. Please.

***

Ten years ago, when Dr Bedelia Du Maurier had killed her patient, Hannibal Lecter had been the one to hide the circumstances of the death. He had saved her from the electric chair, and damned her to a life as his therapist, instead.

When pushed to extreme measures, one's true character becomes known.

Watching her shudder at her own malicious act, her own cruelty, Hannibal had done nothing to hide the proud purr he felt rattling in his chest. She was covered in blood; her right arm and all of her right shoulder; splattered over her face from the attack, her pores stained and cuticles pink.

She hadn't recognized him at first. Going into shock, no doubt.

'He attacked me,' she'd said, her voice hoarse in the aftermath of Rut. Her scent glands were still swollen, crushing her windpipe, and Hannibal had smelled the musky tang of her arousal.

You enjoyed hurting him.

'Is that your blood?' he'd asked, already knowing the answer.

‘No.’

Crouching beside the dead Beta, Hannibal had asked Bedelia if she had been defending herself, before inspecting the pristine, unmarred hands of the supposed attacker.

‘I was reckless,’ Bedelia had admitted, glancing towards him.

‘This wasn’t reckless violence,’ Hannibal had said, forcing her to stay with him in the reality he had spent so many years carefully constructed for her. ‘It was a controlled use of force.’

You chose to do this.

‘I know what happened,’ Bedelia had replied, a tear rolling down her cheek at the hopelessness of her situation.

You set me up.

‘Do you?’ Hannibal’s gaze had pierced her, even from behind, and Bedelia’s heart had hurt so much to know she was so utterly trapped by the man she’d once called friend.

‘He was your patient before he was mine.’

***

Will would call me reckless for what I’m about to do, Hannibal thinks, rising to the podium at the front of the room of the *Palazzo Capponi* to deliver his lecture on Dante. *If only he were here with me.*

He imagines him there, in place of Bedelia. Will looks resplendent in an Omegan-cut tuxedo, his hair combed back and a wedding ring glinting on his hand. The suit is nipped in at the waist, cut down at the neck but still modest over his crest.

Will wipes a hand over his face, hiding a groan of disapproval as his Alpha peacocks on the stage before a roomful of pompous Alphas.

‘In accord with my own taste for the pre-Renaissance,’ Hannibal says, rich voice carrying easily across the sea of scholars; ‘I present the case of Pietro della Vigna, whose treachery earned him a place in Dante’s Hell.’

Don’t ever betray me, beloved. It will be the last thing you ever do.

He moves in front of the projector screen as he talks, covered by the demonic faces of Dante’s Inferno.

Fitting, Will thinks, his stomach twisting uncomfortably at all the attention on his partner. *Since you are the Devil.*

‘He was disgraced,’ Hannibal continues, ‘and blinded for betraying his emperor’s trust.’

The face of Lucifer gazes from his, and Hannibal's eyes flicker the red of hellfire before he clicks onto the next image.

'Dante's pilgrim finds him in the seventh level of the Inferno,' he says, glancing over his shoulder at the artwork. 'Reserved for suicides.'

Better to kill yourself than have me kill you. I'll make it hurt more.

'Like Judas Iscariot, he died by hanging,' he adds, walking to the side to allow his audience to see the beautiful paintings. 'Judas and Pietro della Vigna are linked in Dante's Inferno…' He wanders down the aisle and places a hand, very carefully, on Will's shoulder.

I forgive you, Will. Will you forgive me?

'Betrayal and hanging,' he says, the poison-tipped words aimed straight for his Omega's heart. 'Then, linked since antiquity, the image appearing again and again in art.'

He knows.

'This is the earliest known depiction of the crucifixion,' Hannibal explains, going to the next slide. 'Carved on an ivory box in Gaul, about AD 400. It includes the death by hanging of Judas, his face upturned to the branch that suspends him.'

You held me up as you cut the life from me, Will thinks, feeling bile scratch the back of his throat. *You tore me down and broke my world apart… So how am I here? How is this happening?*

'On the doors of the Benevento Cathedral, we see Judas hanging with his bowels falling out.' As he speaks, Hannibal's eyes flicker to the back of the room. A latecomer hovers behind the columns; a handsome young Omega in a frock coat and patterned scarf.

My dear Mr Dimmond.

'And here,' Hannibal continues; 'from a fifteenth-century edition of *The Inferno*, is Pietro della Vigna's body, hanging from a bleeding tree.'

Will, sensing Hannibal's interest has been piqued, looks over. His heart sinks further and his mouth goes very dry.

Anthony Dimmond… And now he knows the truth; that Hannibal is pretending to be Dr Roman Fell. And the only way someone can take another person's identity without them reporting you is if that person is dead.

You just signed your own death, Mr Dimmond. Why did you have to come? Why did you have to indulge your curiosity, as I did?

'I won't belabor the parallels with Judas Iscariot,' Hannibal says, humming softly at the woodcutting of a man dying in agony from a palm tree. 'Betrayal, hanging… *self-destruction*…' He sighs. '"*Io fei gibetto a me de le mie case"*. "I make my own home be my gallows".'

I'll kill you at home, Will. If you ever come back to me, I will kill you for betraying me.

'Mr Dimmond.' Hannibal gestures for Anthony to take a spare seat at the back. 'Welcome. Please, join us.'

Anthony inclines his head, bashful and coy, his sweet Omegan scent soothing the riled Alphas around him as he slips into a chair so as not to distract from the rest of the lecture.

'We were just about to discuss the matter of chewing in Dante.'

Anthony smiles, his blue eyes narrowed. He's sure *Dr Fell* will give him quite a bit to chew on.

The next time Hannibal glances at the seat in the middle row, Will has gone.

***

There's an odd sense of the surreal as Will runs down the marble steps of the Palazzo Capponi, his heart hammering in his chest and brow prickling with sweat. He has a feeling that he isn't really here, that he isn't in Florence, racing home to his apartment to pack his bags and leave before Hannibal's lecture finishes.

I'm not running… I'm flat on my back…

Still, he hails a cab and tries not to hurry the driver as they follow the twisting roads back to the riverside apartment. Once inside, Will stops for a moment to look around, trying to remember how he got here. How he got from the townhouse that awful evening to Florence…

Is this even real?

He flinches at the baby's cry, but the sound tugs so viscerally at him that it can't not be real. He'd know that sound anywhere. His baby; his little girl.

I'm here, sweetheart. I'm right here.

***

As Will tends to their child, Hannibal concludes his lecture. There is a round of applause, not too loud but certainly enthusiastic, and then the scholars and esteemed Alphas of Florence rise to leave, several passing before Hannibal to congratulate him on a stellar discussion.

'Thank you,' Hannibal says, shaking hands with Madame Forreri, one of the *Capponi* benefactors. 'Thank you for your kind attention.'

He notices that Anthony Dimmond remains seated, legs crossed and hands clasped on his knee. Golden eyes lock onto red and it is only when the remaining scholars and their guests have left that the Omega rises to approach him.

Professor Sogliato arrives first, as oily and unpleasant as ever, and Hannibal speaks without looking up from tidying his notes.

‘Would you say I secured my position, Professor Sogliato?’

‘Well, the Studiolo seem…’ Sogliato deliberately searches for the right word, as if the very taste of it is unpleasant in his mouth. ‘*Satisfied*.’

‘Satisfied?’ Anthony sways his hips and dips his head to grin at the smaller Alpha as he challenges his assessment of the lecture. ‘I thought the applause was downright enthusiastic!’ He chuckles. ‘In its soft and dusty way.’

‘Dottore Fell is a friend of yours?’ Professor Sogliato asks, looking from Alpha to Omega with a frown.

Anthony smirks, his irises flooding gold as he plays with the predator before him.

‘I was his TA at Cambridge,’ he says, and Boris – Roman – whoever he is – looks at him with an inscrutable expression on his gorgeous face. It emboldens him. Makes him add, in a daring whisper, ‘The tales I could tell.’

Don’t, Hannibal thinks, irises flashing brighter red for just a second before he smiles.

Professor Sogliato, noting the sudden tension between them, smirks again.

‘Please do.’

Anthony, smiling knowingly at the Alpha posing as his old mentor, merely purrs softly and releases a wave of hormones to soothe the two Alphas around him, his scent thick and sweet.

‘What kind of friend would I be?’ he replies, and then looks at the smaller, Italian Alpha with a helpless shrug.

‘Hm.’ Professor Sogliato’s eyes flicker crimson and then fade to black with disappointment. He’ll get no support here. The Omega is clearly lovesick. ‘What kind of *friend*, indeed.’

Not a friend. An amante. A lover. A sycophant from your legendary harem.

He grinds his back teeth and sighs through his nose.

‘Dottore.’

With a sharp nod at Dr Fell and his *Omega-secondi*, Professor Sogliato retreats and leaves them to their evening.

He is a patient man. And he will see Dr Fell removed from the Studiolo, if it’s the last thing he does.

In the ensuing silence, Hannibal continues to tidy up his notes, fastidiously avoiding Anthony’s piercing gaze. He wants to know how long the Omega can keep waiting.

Eventually, when it becomes apparent that Anthony isn't going to speak, Hannibal graces him with a cool smile. His eyes are dark, the burgundy drawing back to thin rings around his irises. He's waiting; curious and cautious in equal measures.

With a knowing smile, a flash of golden eyes and a low purr, Anthony turns away, enticing the Alpha to follow after him. He trails a finger along the iron cage hanging from a wicked-looking hook, leaving a fading scent behind him before moving on.

'An exposition of atrocious torture instruments,' he murmurs, 'appeals to connoisseurs of the very *worst* in mankind.'

Hannibal follows very close behind him, hands loosely held in the pockets of his tuxedo trousers.

'Now that ceaseless exposure has calloused us to the lewd and the vulgar, it is instructive to see what still seems wicked to us,' he says, eyeing the display of a cruel, medieval Omegan crest brace in a glass cabinet.

'What still slaps the clammy flab of our submissive consciousness hard enough to get our attention?' Anthony replies, repressing a shiver of repulsion at the device. He pauses before another contraption meant to control wayward Omegas; a Scold's Bridle, complete with crest pincher.

'What wickedness has your attention, Mr Dimmond?' Hannibal asks, and Anthony speaks over his shoulder without looking at the Alpha.

'Yours,' he says. He turns, his eyes glowing like golden suns from within his pretty face. '*Dr Fell*.'

Hannibal says nothing, just waits, and Anthony smirks as he turns away, believing himself safe.

'Oh, I have no delusions about morality,' he says. 'If I did, I would have gone to 'la polizia'.' He moves towards a wooden wheel, still stained with the blood of ancient victims. 'I'm curious as to what fate befell Dr Fell,' he continues, wandering around the back of it, staying a few steps ahead of the Alpha. 'To see you here in his stead.'

Hannibal smiles, his eyes sparking red in the darkness.

'You may have to strap me to the breaking wheel to loosen my tongue,' he purrs, daring the Omega to try.

Will could. Only Will.

'You overestimate my affection for the genuine Dr Fell,' Anthony replies, allowing his disdain to curl his upper lip. 'Clearly, you found him as distasteful as I did.'

'On the contrary,' Hannibal replies. *His liver, in particular, was delicious.*

Anthony narrows his eyes and steps closer, each man on a side of the wheel.

‘We could twist ourselves into all manner of uncomfortable positions,’ he whispers, ‘just to maintain appearances… with or without a breaking wheel.’

Hannibal tilts his head and smirks.

‘Are you here to twist me into an uncomfortable position?’ he teases, a low purr rattling in his chest when Anthony’s breath catches.

‘I’m here to help you untwist,’ the Omega breathes. ‘To our *mutual* benefit.’

Hannibal’s smiles widens, his eyes sharpening with hunger.

It will be to my benefit, certainly… But not to yours, Mr Dimmond.

***

At the apartment, Will throws together a suitcase of clothes and essentials for himself, Abigail and the baby, and is shepherding his family towards the front doors when the handle turns and his blood runs cold.

I’m too late.

He falls back as the door opens towards him, hugging the baby close to him and keeping Abigail behind him.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow at him before leading the way inside, coolly disapproving of his attempts to flee. Just behind him, looking curiously amused, is Anthony Dimmond.

You’re killing him here… In front of our children?

The Omega barely glances at Will – *Luther Fell, or whoever you are* – and Hannibal seals them all inside together.

Safe from prying eyes, and all they might report.

‘Shall we discuss terms?’ Anthony asks, turning to face the man responsible for the death of his former mentor.

The blow comes instantly. Without hesitating, Hannibal picks up the heavy marble phrenology bust from the side table and swings it, with all his strength, over the back of Anthony’s head.

The sharp edge pierces his skull, fracturing the bone and crushing his brain. Blood sprays, casting a wide arc, and Abigail jumps back with an audible gasp, her hands over her mouth. Will flinches but he can’t move fast enough to stop the spatter of blood across his face, staining the back of his baby’s head.

Born in blood.

Anthony collapses on his front, limbs heavy and useless. Hannibal snarls, gathering himself back up after the swing and inspects the red dripping from the edge of the weapon.

Crude, but effective. And there is some satisfaction to have used the model of an Omegan brain to destroy another.

As he steps away, Anthony groans and tries to lift his head. Pain is like a living thing inside his mind, crawling tendrils down his spine and into his arms. He feels sick, his vision wavering and blurry. He whimpers, the scent of fear mingling with rapid-onset Heat hormones designed to soothe the Alpha threatening him, enticing him into protecting him.

'Observe or participate,' Hannibal says, placing the blood-smeared bust back onto the table. He looks over at Will as he speaks, shrugging out of his coat with a cold, cruel little smile.

Will, his heat hammering and brain spinning at the idea that Hannibal really is killing someone in front of their daughter, their *baby*, just blinks at him, too stunned to process the question. He takes a moment, and then realizes that Hannibal really is directing the statement – question? – towards him.

Make a choice.

'What?' he asks, shaking his head to clear the fog.

This isn't real. This isn't happening. It's a dream.

Hannibal growls, baring a hint of fang, and his eyes burn crimson.

'Are you, in this very moment, observing or participating?' he demands, forcing Will to make a choice.

You're never getting away from me, mylimasis. So choose; join me as my equal or support me as a subservient.

Will tries to swallow, hating the smell of coppery blood in the air. The baby feels weightless in his arms, like it isn't really there; the dream is collapsing into a nightmare and he can't move. He can't leave. Can't do anything.

'Observing,' he whispers, his back pressed to a marble column as Hannibal wanders away to set his coat down.

Sensing an opportunity, a chance, however slim, Anthony starts to drag himself towards the door. If he can get to the handle, get it open, he can scream for help. He can alert someone to his situation.

'You say you're observing,' Hannibal calls, allowing Anthony his futile efforts; 'but *this*… This is participation, William. Did you know what he would do?'

He steps carefully over the growing pool of blood seeping into the floorboards, burgundy eyes locked onto his Omega as he closes the distance between them.

‘I would prefer you answer honestly,’ he warns, and Will trembles under the intensity of the stare.

Don’t lie to me. The agreement between them both, enduring no matter what. They can refuse to answer, but they can’t lie to one another.

‘I… was curious,’ he admits, and Hannibal nods, pleased so far with the reply.

‘You were curious what would happen,’ he says, narrowing his eyes just slightly at the smaller man. ‘You were curious what Dr Dimmond would do… What *I* would do.’ He reaches out, gently caressing Will’s cheek, his thumb brushing the scratchy beard at his jaw. ‘Did you anticipate our thoughts? Counter-thoughts? Rationalizations?’

‘Yes,’ Will whispers, the confession drawn from him by the intensity of his mate’s expression. Hannibal hums, considering the response, and then steps back, gesturing down to Mr Dimmond, who continues struggling to drag his dying body towards the door.

‘Is this what you expected?’ he asks, and Will buries his face in the soft, sweet-smelling hair of their baby, desperate to comfort himself in the dream before it all collapses and he’s left alone again. Tears well in his eyes and he hears a whimper catch in his throat, his eyes flaring gold behind the wetness.

Anthony Dimmond was dead the moment he met Hannibal Lecter. *He* was dead the moment he met him.

‘Yes.’

Hannibal nods, his eyes hard and flat. Shark eyes. Killer eyes.

You didn’t look like that in the kitchen, but you did when I rejected you in the prison… You did just before you killed Beverly.

‘That’s participation,’ the Alpha says coldly, and Will gulps back a whine. He sags, limbs shaking and tingling, as Hannibal steps away, intent on his new victim.

Anthony gasps at the pain shooting down his back when he tries to lift his arm to the handle. He gives his head a sharp shake, trying to clear the blood from his eye and the dark spots swarming his vision.

I’m not going to die, he thinks. *It’s not going to end like this. Not here. Not like this.*

Hannibal purrs, long and loud, and walks quickly to the Omega stretching for the doorknob. He plants his feet on either side of the man’s body, settles his weight in his thighs and clasps his hands beneath Anthony’s jaw.

A sharp tug and a wrench backwards separates the top three vertebrae from the rest of the spinal column. Nerves snap and the signals commanding the brain and heart to keep going are interrupted.

Death occurs in moments. Anthony Dimmond collapses, the light fading from his golden eyes, and Hannibal pulls a silk handkerchief from the breast pocket of his tuxedo, wiping blood from his fingers as he leaves the corpse by the door.

‘What *have* you gotten yourself into, my dear Will?’ he taunts, smirking at the quivering Omega desperately clutching their baby to his chest. ‘Shall I hang up your coat?’

When Will hesitates, Hannibal settles the handkerchief back into its pocket and reaches out to help, making it very clear that it is an order, not a request.

Will flinches, a tear trickling down his cheek, but he doesn’t fight Hannibal when his Alpha removes the overcoat from his shoulders. He adjusts the bundle of sleeping babe, focusing all his attention on comforting the little child, and holds very still when Hannibal presses a kiss to his forehead.

‘Close your eyes,’ the Alpha murmurs, and Will obeys. He feels himself drifting into a deep and painless sleep, rocking gently with the faint clack of wheels on a train track. He’s warm, safe and on his way back to where he belongs.

I’m coming for you, beloved. Are you ready?

***

He misses Will so much it hurts.

Hannibal stares from the window of his private train carriage. He’s on his way to Palermo, carrying with him a large suitcase, tightly sealed and strapped shut to hold his precious cargo inside.

He was never a replacement for you, mylimasis.

The day is clear and bright, but is little comfort in the beauty of the Italian countryside speeding past. Not in the vineyards or olive groves, the clay-roof villages or the ancient churches.

I’m not with Will. I’ve not been with him for months. He broke my heart, so I broke him. Gutted and Cut him to terminate the pregnancy and sever the bond. The best way to hurt him.

The only way I knew how to set him free.

As afternoon surrenders to evening, and Hannibal’s belly rumbles with hunger, his mind wanders back the last meal he cooked for Dr Gideon. Escargot, with Chantilly cream and white wine sauce, served with fresh lemon and garlic butter. It was a meal he’d hoped to cook for Will, rich in protein and amino acids for the baby, but instead of his beloved Omega, he had sat across the length of the table from the surly, uncouth Alpha.

Abel, petulant as ever, had tapped his two-pronged fork on the fine china bowl, creating an offensive clang at odds with the light French horn medley of pavane.

Determined to ignore him, to simply enjoy the flavors and textures of the meal, Hannibal had eaten his first cochlear, but the lesser Alpha's obvious stare and the rhythmic *thunk* of metal on porcelain had grated on his nerves.

'Would you rather I extended you the same kindness as the escargot?' he asked, and finally, *finally* Abel had stopped tapping the fork.

'Eating me without my knowledge?' he'd pretended to consider it. 'No. I find knowing to be far more powerful.' *Knowing you'll be caught… Knowing you'll be betrayed and eaten by the man you love… Eventually.* 'Why do you think I'm allowing this?'

'Why do you think *I'm* allowing this?' Hannibal had countered, adding sauce to a second cochlear. Abel had sniffed derisively.

''Cos snails aren't the only creatures who prefer eating with company,' he'd said, as if it was obvious. A purr and a flash of red eyes; the last vestiges of Alphan strength in his mutilated, half-eaten body. 'If *only* that company could be *Will Graham.*'

Abel had then, lacking any finesse or refinement, stabbed at an escargot, whacking it back and forth until the shell loosened and released the dark flesh of the cochlear. A quick blow, an eyeroll and he had popped it into his mouth, chewing with disinterest before dropping his fork with a clatter.

'I'm just fascinated to know how *you* will feel when all this…' Abel had looked around, at the plate, the table, the whole damn charade; 'happens to *you*.'

In the train carriage, at the end of a long, lonely day, Hannibal watches the sun sink beneath the distant hills. The sky is the bruised blush of twilight, flickering not with the first view of stars but with the streetlamps of the approaching town.

I loved you. I gave you all of myself. And you betrayed me. Ate me alive with your deception.

He tears a page from the historic textbook smuggled out of the Capponi library. Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, arms and legs spread wide.

He folds the neck backwards, just as he did with Anthony Dimmond. The paper is easier to manipulate than flesh, but he has the strength to replicate this in muscle and bone.

The torso is next, halved and quartered, ribs splintered and organs squashed to make room for the shape. Hannibal breaks the arms and legs of the drawing, twisting and pushing until the last fold is complete.

Then, as the train pulls into the Palermo station, Hannibal opens his origami creation out, revealing a tiny, anatomically correct human heart.

For you, mylimasis. My heart. My love.

***

Dawn light seeps through the high windows of the Norman Chapel at Palermo. Dust motes hang in the air, God's house silent but for the drip of blood onto the ancient mosaic floor.

The tableau doesn't even resemble a body at first. Shadows dancing with the opening rays of a new day slide off the edges of a broken torso. The skin has been flayed, the bones broken and ribs crushed, limbs twisted and pinned. Impaled on three swords, the overall image is one of a human heart, perfectly balanced over the center of the skull graven into the floor.

A shocking reminder of mortality.

Come find me, Will. I'm ready.

Primavera

Chapter Summary

Will wakes after a long and difficult recovery following Hannibal's attack in Baltimore, trying to piece his life and his shattered psyche back together.

Chapter Notes

Ooosh, okay, important chapter... I really hope I've done it justice and that you all enjoy it. Comments, especially on this one, will be very much appreciated. xxx

TWO

Primavera

THEN

It isn't supposed to be like this.

The thought swarms in Will's mind; a dark and endless buzz of panic as he follows the trail of destruction through the townhouse.

Alana lies dying outside; thrown from the upper window to shatter on the front steps. Jack is nowhere to be found, but Will smells the cloying, scratching scent of Rut, two distinctive tangs, and he knows his mentor, his boss, his friend, is here.

Is he already dead? Am I too late?

Beyond the barrel of his gun, cocked and ready to fire if he needs it, Will sees blood seeping from beneath the pantry door. So much blood… Jack's blood…

How much blood can one person lose?

A sound catches his attention; a hitched breath and a sob, quickly stifled. Will spins, his heart racing, adrenaline spiking and finger tightening on the trigger –

Shock robs him of his strength, and he almost drops the weapon from suddenly numb hands when he sees who it is.

‘A-… Abigail?’

His surrogate daughter quivers, tears rolling down her cheeks, limbs locked in place by fear and shock. Her brown hair is swept back into a high pony, revealing a shocking gap on her right side, where her ear should be.

The ear he made me swallow…

Will’s brain can’t make sense of it all. It registers facts, not feelings; Abigail is wearing hunting clothes. Abigail is dry, but for a misting of rain on one arm. Abigail’s blue eyes dart from his face to his shoulder and back, as if she’s waiting for someone.

‘I… I didn’t know what else to do,’ the Beta whispers, her lip wobbling as fresh tears well. ‘So… I just did what he told me.’

What he told you…

Hannibal.

Will’s brow furrowed and sadness leeches the strength from his voice.

‘Where is he?’

Abigail’s breath catches and she shivers again; Hannibal has crept into the room behind Will. She tries to tell him, tries to say something but the words get stuck in her throat and all she can do is look, frantically, over Will’s shoulder to tell him he’s there, the Alpha is right there, with a curved blade in his hand.

The hairs on Will’s arms stand on end and his crest prickles as he senses a threat behind him. He turns, terrified of what he’ll see, his lungs squeezed too small inside his chest for all the words he wants to say.

‘You were supposed to *leave*.’

Hannibal is haggard; exhausted from the fight with Jack and bleeding from a dozen wounds. His neck is swollen; a ligature bruise already darkening, and the pale scar of his Alphan crests stands out in sharp contrast against the damaged flesh. But it is the grief in his eyes that cuts Will; the pain of the betrayal. *His* betrayal.

Is that how I looked? When you did it to me?

The Alpha gazes at him, more honest and vulnerable than Will has ever seen him before. He can see the child he once was, the man he became and the monster he so carefully cultivated. There is no mask, no veil. No carefully tailored person suit.

Just an Alpha and an Omega, and a web of lies strung between them.

‘We couldn’t leave without you,’ Hannibal says, and Will hears a whimper catch in his own throat. He stares, drowning in the emotions battering Hannibal’s fractured psyche. His mate is

clinging to anger; a dark, bitter fury at being betrayed, but stronger than that is fear, hurt and confusion. A deep sense of failure, of rejection, of not being worthy of Will's love.

Feel it, he thinks, wanting to reach for the other man, to comfort him as he experiences true emotions for the first time since childhood. *Don't hide behind rage.*

Hannibal sighs, his breath wobbling. He reaches for Will, cupping his cheek in the palm of his left hand. His thumb strokes reverently over his eyebrow, wiping away tears, and for just a moment there is such a sweet sense of *love* flowing through their bond that Will's heart stops.

And then Hannibal slips his hand back, gripping Will tight by the crest, paralyzing him, and cuts into his abdomen with a curved knife.

The pain is overwhelming. Will cries out, his body jerking instinctively to get away from the blade but unable to do so because of the hold on his neck. Shock comes first, the unbelievable thought that Hannibal is really doing this, stabbing him, risking their child, and then panic swallows him as he realizes *where* Hannibal's knife is buried.

The baby… Hannibal, no, the baby!

Abigail gives a little scream, covering her mouth with her hands to silence it as Hannibal drags the blade sideways across Will's belly.

Will spasms again, dropping the gun from numb, useless hands. He grabs for his Alpha's arm, blood spattering the floor, covering their shoes, and falls against him as his uterus cramps and his balls shrink up against his body.

Hannibal holds him close, a twisted parody of affection, but it's not comfort he offers.

The curved blade of the nuchalectomy knife slides beneath Will's crest like butter. Skin parts from muscle, muscle from bone, nerve from sinew, and the sound Will makes has Hannibal hugging him tight and stroking his hair, defying all logic as his instincts take over, desperate to undo the damage he's done.

I loved you.

Will is shaking, sobbing against Hannibal's chest, flayed alive and dying in his Alpha's arms. He can feel blood spilling down his back, wetting his shirt more, and the ragged flap of skin left at the top of his neck makes him sick. He can't help but nuzzle Hannibal's shoulder, sucking up the smell of him, his body a mess of razor-pain and hot nausea.

The baby…

'Time did reverse,' Hannibal murmurs, hugging him close as their bond collapses, the beautiful cherub-painted room of their memory palace fading forever. 'The teacup that I shattered did come together.'

The ambulance is coming… If they get here in time, they can save the baby…

Will clings to him, his mind stuck on that one, futile hope. He can't let go; he can't stop whimpering for his Alpha to save him. To save their child.

Please… Please, Hannibal, please…

'A place was made for Abigail in your world,' Hannibal continues, still hugging him, still stroking his hair, his scent thick with soothing pheromones to ease his Omega's pain. 'Do you understand?'

I don't understand anything.

Will shakes his head, his breath hitching as cold agony sweeps through him. He's dizzy, and he squeezes his eyes tightly shut as he hugs Hannibal with desperate abandon, silently screaming for him to stop, to please, *please* just make it *stop*.

I never wanted this.

'A place was made for all of us,' Hannibal advises, his voice breaking with emotion. 'Together.'

As he pushes him away, holding him up in a choking grip, Will sees the mangled remains of his Alphan crest, cracked and peeling from the front of his throat. Old blood mingles with new as everything they'd built together crashes down around them, and he feels like his whole world is pouring out of him with every pint of blood lost.

'I wanted to surprise you,' Hannibal explains, and Will sobs because he can imagine it; he can imagine how happy, how grateful and relieved he would have been if the night had gone how they'd planned… 'And *you*…' The Alpha glances down at the gun, disgusted. 'You wanted to surprise me.'

No… no, I didn't… Not like this.

The hands holding him up let him go and Will collapses to the floor. He has just enough control left to make sure he rolls as he lands, falling onto his elbow rather than his open belly, and he presses the flesh together in a vain effort to somehow protect the fetus inside.

This can't be real… This can't be happening.

Abigail tries to go after him, but a sharp look from Hannibal freezes her in her place and she watches, helpless, as Will props himself against the wall by the oven, pathetically holding his stomach where the baby is, surely, dying.

'I let you know me!' Hannibal snarls, glaring down at Will, his eyes burning red and wet with tears. '*See* me.'

He pauses, struggling to control himself, desperate to lose himself in anger to protect against the pain of his emotions.

'I gave you a rare gift,' he continues, his knuckles white around the wooden handle of the Cutting knife. Tears spill, unchecked, down his face, and Will's shattered mind has no walls

or forts or barriers to protect against the onslaught of despair coming from the other man. ‘But you didn’t want it.’

I wasn’t good enough for you. I wasn’t good enough for Mischa. The only thing I’m good at is killing.

‘Didn’t I?’ Will whispers, staring up at the man to whom he’d given his heart. The man who had, so thoroughly broken him again.

I wanted it, Hannibal. I still do. I want you.

‘You would deny me my life,’ Hannibal growls, but Will shakes his head, almost fainting at the pain in his neck.

‘No,’ he manages, gritting his teeth to keep from screaming. ‘Not your life, not –’

‘My freedom, then!’ Hannibal snaps. ‘You would take *that* from me.’ He turns away as Will gasps and shudders in another bout of pain, and speaks absently towards Abigail as he gives voice to the horror of the foolhardy plan that had, ultimately, failed. ‘Confine me to a prison cell.’

Abigail watches, wary for her own safety, sad for him but hurting more for Will.

Hannibal looks back at Will, tilting his head, his eyes dead and dark like chips of black ice in his face. His anger is winning; black emptiness is a better refuge than the temporary comfort of a lover. If he shuts down his emotions, he won’t hurt anymore, just like before. He’s lost him, Will knows; Hannibal has sought refuge inside the anger and there’s nothing left but rage.

‘Did you believe you could change me?’ the Alpha asks, eerily curious even as Will dies in front of him. ‘The way I’ve changed you?’

Ignoring the tears spilling from his eyes, Will stares up into his mate’s face, wishing he could hide in his own fury but feeling only pain.

‘I already did.’

He manages the tiniest of smiles, sad and sorry, and then curls around himself as another wave of agony steals his breath.

More than you’ll ever know.

Hannibal releases a long, slow breath, as if resigning himself to the course of action. As if, somehow, there was still a chance he might change his mind. Until now.

‘Fate and circumstance have returned us to this moment,’ he murmurs. ‘When the teacup shatters.’

We can never really undo the past… All we can do is learn from our mistakes and move forwards as best we can, broken though we may be.

Will can feel his mind starting to splinter. His consciousness, tethered so tenuously in the first place, now ripped from his moorings like a boat in a storm.

My foundations are shifting sands.

He bares his teeth at Hannibal, hating the resignation in the other man's voice. It doesn't have to be this way; it *doesn't*, but Hannibal is just giving in. He isn't fighting for them. Why isn't he fighting for them?

You were supposed to be my paddle.

'I forgive you, Will,' Hannibal says, so softly that Will's heart leaps with the hope that maybe, maybe, he's changed his mind. 'Wil you forgive me?'

Forgive you…?

It takes him a second, just a second, and then he realizes what Hannibal means. What he was referring to when he mentioned the teacup and time.

'Oh, don't… *d-don't*…' He shakes his head, desperate little mewls huffing on his labored breath, even as the Alpha reaches for Abigail.

The Beta looks at Hannibal, puzzled, and then goes to him; a good little lamb to the slaughter. She knows; Will can see the thought in her face, but maybe she doesn't quite believe it, either. Maybe, somehow, she still trusts him not to hurt her too badly…

'Abigail,' Hannibal murmurs, drawing her in like a spider with a fly. 'Come to me.'

He holds her to him, her back to his chest, his strong arms caging her in, just like Hobbs did in the kitchen last year.

It's happening again, but Will can't save her this time. He can't do anything to stop his Alpha, his mate, from killing their first child. Their daughter.

Born in blood.

'No, no, no! Hannibal! No!' he sobs, but it's no use.

The blade cuts deep, slicing through muscle and severing the artery. Abigail chokes, drowning in her own blood, even as more of it spurts across Will's face, blinding him.

The Beta falls to her knees and then onto her back, gasping and holding onto her neck, her fingers stained red as the skin parts. She's so pale and there's so much blood pouring out of her, hurried along by the pounding of her panicked heart.

Please… Please make it stop.

Will leans over, one arm cradling his own wound, the other reaching for his daughter's. He tries, desperately, to stem the flow but it's too fast and the skin is slippery with it.

Hannibal crouches beside him, his face oddly tender as he watches the futile attempt to save Abigail's life.

'You can make it all go away,' he says softly. 'Put your head back… Close your eyes… Wade into the quiet of the stream.'

I don't need a memory palace. All I need is a stream.

Will hates him; in that moment, in that kitchen, he hates Hannibal Lecter with every fiber of his being. He hates that he ever met him; hates that he didn't shoot him when he had the chance.

I wish Jack had killed you.

Hannibal rises and Will hears himself start to keen, frantic to save his dying daughter and dying fetus. He's alone; there's no one to save them, and their lives are slipping through his fingers.

You broke me. I thought you loved me but you're addicted to watching me suffer.

Will hears a breath, the labored gasp of a creature in pain. He turns his head; a futile hope quickly crushed that it might be someone who can help.

It's the Ravenstag. Lying by the counter, its great antlers cracked and flaking, its flanks soaked with blood, drying to stiffen feather and fur.

It's dying.

The creature pants, its eyes rolling back in pain. Each gasp for breath mirrors Will's, growing shallower with every slowing heartbeat until, at last, it's over. As the last breath fades, the stag begins to dissolve into a tide of red. Will hears water, the current of the stream tugging at him, and he can't do anything to stop it from rushing over him.

Blood drowns the kitchen. Will's body is cold and heavy, and he has a sense of sinking, even as his mind drifts upwards and away. He can't hold on anymore. The teacup falls, white porcelain in the darkness, and then he shatters into a thousand tiny pieces.

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

***

NOW

It's dark. It's always dark where he is. Madness coils around him like a python, caressing him with its scales even as it crushes the life from him.

Will turns, twisting to get away, but the snake holds him tight. It pins him to the ground, clamping its jaws on the back of his neck, cold fangs cutting into the ragged scar of his

mangled crest, paralyzing him as sure as any brace.

‘Hannibal!’ Will cries for him, begging him to stop, to save him, to find him in the abyss, but all he hears is an echo of his own voice, mocking him in the void.

How long has he been here? It feels like forever, but time really has no meaning in the gap between life and death. Will isn’t even sure he’s *Will* anymore. Maybe Will Graham died in that kitchen, long ago. Maybe he’s nothing but a remnant of a man long gone.

Was I ever really here? Was I ever anything at all?

He drifts on a breeze of blood and tears, carried downstream in a splash of chubby hands in soapy water, a copper bathtub and flowing gauze curtains.

‘Mischa!’ A little boy calls from the banks of the river, but try as he might, Will can’t see who it is. ‘Willy…’

My father called me that… When I was a child… Am I a child again?

The thoughts slip through his fingers and the water closes over his head. The snake squeezes again, tugging him under, and Will drowns in his own madness.

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‘The damage is… extensive,’ Dr Shapiro admits, glancing sideways at the Beta man stood beside him. ‘The knife used to perform the nuchalectomy is called a *Koboi*; a traditional Cutting knife… It removed almost all of Will’s nuchal tissue, and caused severe nerve damage.’

Bill Graham shudders. He wrings his ragged green baseball cap between calloused hands, staring through the glass of the Stonebarrow Specialist Omega Hospital’s Intensive Care Unit with the same blue eyes as his son. Will is lying on a bed, wired to monitors and IV drips, intubated and fighting for his sanity. His life.

‘He ever gon’ wake up?’ Bill asks, his voice barely more than a whisper. ‘You’ve had him here for months. Got him in some sort of induced coma, right?’ He swallows and brushes angrily at the tears on his grizzled cheeks. ‘So… So, he could wake up if you stopped pumpin’ him full’a that crap, right?’

‘Mr Graham…’ Dr Shapiro sighs. ‘The psychological trauma alone could still kill him, even *with* the sedatives. If Will experiences the slightest amount of stress, he could go into shock or Heat, and both of those things would be very, very bad. Right now, the best thing for everyone is for him to remain in a deep and dreamless sleep.’

‘My Willy’s never had dreamless sleep,’ Bill mutters, his eyes on the screen displaying the Omega’s brainwaves. ‘You can bet your ass he’s fighin’ somethin’ in that mind of his.’

Dr Shapiro reaches out and gives the older man’s elbow a quick, comforting squeeze.

‘Let’s hope, for Will’s sake, that he’s fighting to stay alive.’

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‘The finest bone china,’ Hannibal murmurs, holding out a gold-rimmed cup and saucer for Will to take. ‘Rumored to be made from the calcified remains of the assassinated Romanov family.’

‘Tea?’ Will asks, looking down at the murky liquid inside the glistening white cup.

‘It’s important to know when it’s time to turn the page,’ Hannibal replies, hands now busy peeling the skin from a potato. They are in the kitchen of the Baltimore townhouse, weak afternoon sunlight slanting through the big windows, Hannibal in a pink shirt and navy waistcoat, his chef’s apron tied tight about his waist, Will in the silk hospital gown from his MRI scans at the Noble Hills Medical Center. ‘Have you thought about what you’re going to do when you wake up?’

‘Having difficulty staying focused,’ Will says, stroking the delicate pattern on the teacup. He wants to go to Hannibal but he can’t make himself move, and the marble countertop filled with glass bowls of rosemary, garlic and onions remains a barrier between them.

‘I would certainly feel better knowing you were being cared for,’ Hannibal comments, now slicing the vegetable into neat wedges. ‘It’s in your nature to look after things, Will. It’s not in your nature to surrender.’

‘Nature versus nurture,’ Will mumbles, trying to get heavy eyes to focus on the liquid. ‘What *is* this?’

‘You’re not Jack’s fragile little teacup,’ Hannibal says, burning him with his gaze when he lifts his head. ‘Not anymore.’

Will shifts his weight, wondering how such a disjointed conversation can feel so normal. He can feel the pull of needles in his hands and the crook of his elbow, and hear, very distantly, the faint blip of a heart monitor.

‘What if it weren’t so painful,’ Hannibal suggests, ‘to think of me anymore?’

‘Not sure I can ever stop thinking about you,’ Will replies. He takes a sip of the drink and grimaces. ‘This isn’t tea.’

‘No,’ Hannibal agrees. ‘It’s Psilocybin.’

‘Mushrooms?’ Will looks down at the floor; at the black mud of the Elk Neck State Park oozing up between his toes. He’s standing in the middle of Eldon Stammet’s garden; perfect rows of decaying bodies fertilizing the chestnuts, oysters and lion’s mane mushrooms, but he’s also in the kitchen.

It's all starting to blur.

‘I told you before,’ Hannibal says, briskly wiping his hands on the apron and striding to the teapot. ‘The mirrors in your mind *can* reflect the best of yourself, not the worst of someone else.’

‘You *broke* my mind,’ Will says, frowning because this isn’t right… This doesn’t feel real, and he’s starting to lose his grip on the cup. On reality. ‘And then you broke *me*…’

‘Do you want to feel *safe*, Will?’

‘I…’ Will can hear his heartbeat, dim but fast. Sweat dribbles down his forehead, stinging his eyes. He’s in the kitchen, standing in a mushroom garden, but the walls are lined with antlers. A thicket of them, each razor tip crowding in on him until he wants to collapse. ‘I feel like I’m fading,’ he whispers. ‘I don’t know how to gauge who I am anymore.’

‘You are who you’ve always been,’ Hannibal promises, and suddenly he’s right in front of him, haggard and exhausted from his fight with Jack. He’s wearing the white shirt, spattered with blood, his nose bleeding and cheek bruised, Alphan crest a stark white line against the ligature mark around his throat.

‘You got inside my head,’ Will manages, his voice wobbling. ‘And you… you *moved* all the furniture around.’

I’ve felt like this before… Drifting in the darkness… Stumbling towards something I don’t understand.

‘We’ve been down this road before, Will,’ Hannibal warns, cupping his face with an oddly tender expression on his own. ‘We both know how it ends.’

‘There is no ending,’ Will whispers, and he can see the curved nuchalectomy blade flash in Hannibal’s other hand. ‘There’s just this.’

He blinks and they’re in the kitchen of the Hobbs’ residence. The worst day of Will’s life… Or so he’d thought.

It can always get worse, can’t it?

The oak cabinets and cream floor are familiar, as is the garish splash of dried blood where he’d believed Abigail had died, rusty brown and black in the darkness. Hannibal stands at his side, wearing Will’s herringbone coat over the top of his red-stained shirt.

‘It’s as if Abigail was supposed to die a kitchen,’ the Alpha murmurs, and Will hums his agreement, pointing to the splashes.

‘Her throat was cut,’ he says. ‘There’s an unmistakable arterial spray.’

‘It’s called a *Koboi*,’ Hannibal mentions, holding the blade up for Will to see. ‘A traditional knife used in the punitive Cutting of wayward Omegas.’

‘“Wayward Omegas”?’ Will snorts in disgust. ‘You mean *independent* Omegas.’

‘It was a different time,’ Hannibal replies. ‘The Japanese Emperors were not so lenient with their mates as I am.’

‘You’ve shown lenience?’ Will looks down at his own reflection in the blade’s surface, but he can’t see his face. He only sees darkness. A wendigo, starving for something it can never have. ‘What does punishment look like?’

‘What do you see?’ Hannibal breathes, moving around him, dragging the tip of the blade across the rounded weight of his pregnant belly, up his arms until it presses into the nape of his neck, just hard enough to hurt.

‘The shape of a man filled with dark and swarming flies…’ Will leans back against him, hugging black, skeletal arms around himself, desperate for comfort in his circle of hell. ‘I *know* who I *am*,’ he promises, his heart racing, feeling sick, closing his eyes against the swaying, swirling world. ‘I am who I’ve *always* been.’

‘Will, you need to relax,’ Hannibal warns, squeezing him uncomfortably tight. ‘You’re going into shock.’

‘You… you had *no* traceable motive,’ Will whispers, blinking through the haze of grey spots clouding his vision, his world shaking through visions of forest, farmhouse, lakeshore, beach, kitchen; a sickening rollercoaster of his worst memories.

His ears are ringing, his *teeth* ache and his skull feels cleaved in two. Acid dribbles onto his brain, sizzling as it melts it from the inside, and his skin is going to slide from his bones with the heat of his body at any moment.

I’ve felt like this before… This is Heat… Fucked up, dangerous Heat.

‘Let me help you,’ Hannibal begs, but there’s no warmth in his embrace, no safety to be found with him. Will can feel tears running freely down his cheeks, strung out on a crucifix to die for the pleasure of his Alpha.

‘You… you were just… *c-curious* what I would do!’ he sobs, dizzy from lack of oxygen, tight as a spring and ready to burst.

Please… please let me die. I can’t stand this anymore.

‘You t-took Abigail away… You t-took my baby away…’

I loved you… I trusted you…

‘Will, you need to push,’ Hannibal orders, but it’s not the knife that Will has in his hands, it’s the teacup. ‘You’re in labor.’

‘I became a monster,’ Will mutters, pressing a bloodied hand to his cramping belly, to the womb rupturing inside, shredded by antlers. ‘I became you.’

‘Prep for surgery.’

Hannibal turns him, holding him up by the shoulders, and Will stares at him, gazing at the beauty of such a cruel and jealous man.

The knife cuts deep, and Will's mind cracks. Shockwaves of pain ripple through him, like lightning in his veins, and the cup falls from his hand.

I know that sound… I'm flatlining… I'm dying.

It's over. Hannibal's won.

And he's lost everything. Again.

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'It's time to wake up, son.'

Sometime later – an eternity, a moment, he can't tell – a man's voice calls to him from across the fields. Will turns towards it, the warm breeze ruffling his hair as he steps onto the porch of his farmhouse. He tips his face towards the sun, basking in the warmth of it. The simple joy of spring in Wolf Trap, Virginia.

Winston pads out of the house to sit beside him, looking out at the daffodils bobbing in the wind. The grass is lush, rich green and thick after such a harsh winter, and Will hums softly to himself, his arms cradling his pregnant belly.

He'd never expected to mate. Never expected to find someone like Hannibal. Someone who loved him for who he was, not for the person he could be.

'Will…'

The voices blend together. His father. His Alpha. His doctor… Will looks down at Winston, desperately seeking refuge in the dream, but the brown collie just whines at him, wagging his tail against the steps and lifting a paw to touch his knee.

Will walks through the yard, beyond the barn, past the boathouse, down to the river out the back. The Ravenstag is there, grazing on the far side of the bank, its black coat dappled with sunlight as it feeds on new shoots.

'I know it hurts,' his dad says, stepping up beside him on the pebbled shore. 'It hurt when your Mom left, too. All I wanted to do was bury myself in whiskey.'

'Why did she leave?' Will asks, still squinting across the expanse of running water, hating the empty feeling inside him as the stag wanders away to disappear between the trees.

Bill Graham sighs, and runs a hand over his face. His greying hair is curled like his son's, hidden beneath a fishing cap and greasy from days sitting at his bedside.

You're in the hospital, Will. Come on; open your eyes.

'She never wanted to be a mother,' the Beta says, pushing his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans, wearing the same hunting jacket that Will owns. The one he gave him when he graduated college.

This isn't real.

'I'd be a good father,' Will whispers, tears falling from his eyes as he looks down at the flat belly beneath his folded arms. At the body where his baby no longer sleeps.

'Then be one,' his dad says, gripping tight to his shoulder. 'It's time to wake up, son.'

The teacup shatters.

It's time to wake up, son.

Time slows. Pauses. Will fractures, drifting in nothingness, and then…

The shrill sound of a baby's cry makes him flinch, the sound tugging so viscerally at him that it *has* to be real.

He'd know that cry anywhere. His baby. His little girl.

I'm here, sweetheart. I'm right here.

She needs him.

Will takes a breath, bracing for the pain, and pulls the pieces of his shattered psyche back together.

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Eyelids heavy as rocks eventually succumb to his efforts.

Will blinks, slowly becoming aware of his surroundings. He's lying in a hospital bed, the room painted in soothing shades of blue and gold, drapes pulled shut across the big window. Frosted glass doors muffle the sounds of the ward outside, and he wonders what time it is.

He can feel silk sheets beneath his back; satin blankets over his legs. His neck doesn't have the raw, stinging feeling of exposed muscle anymore, though he's grateful for the softness of the pillow beneath his head.

His mouth tastes like chemicals, his nose filled with the scent of antiseptic and fresh gauze.

He can hear the blip of his heart monitor, and sees wires feeding from every part of his body to screens and IV drips.

His gut throbs and he winces, pressing a hand to the bandages wrapped tight around his flat abdomen.

The baby.

Did it survive? Was the cry he'd heard real? He'd thought it was real… But if it was real, then why isn't he larger? Why doesn't he have post-pregnancy body? Why is his belly bandaged?

The door opens and a doctor walks in, dressed in a white lab coat stamped with *Stonebarrow Medical Facility* on the pocket. He's an Alpha but his scent has been dulled, and Will can see the edges of contacts over his eyes, blocking out the hint of red in his irises. A useful tactic when dealing with traumatized Omegas, no doubt.

'Welcome back,' Dr Shapiro says, eyeing him carefully. 'We thought we'd lost you for a while, there.'

'How long is "a while"?' Will asks, his voice hoarse. Dr Shapiro grimaces at the clipboard between his hands.

'We had to sedate you again for nearly a month,' he admits. He gestures to the bandages. 'You ripped your stitches twice during fits and you were at risk of internal bleeding if we didn't keep you immobile.' He tilts his head and draws closer. 'How do you feel?'

Will thinks. He doesn't know how to answer that question. How *does* his feel? How does he feel after having his crest sliced off, his bond to his Alpha brutally severed and his mind ripped apart? How does he feel, knowing he's lost his baby? Knowing he's been here for a least a month, comatose and immobilized, all because he made the wrong choice?

I feel broken. Hollow. Dead. Like I want to scream but I'm mute. Like I'm drowning on dry land.

'Thirsty,' he manages, because it's the safest thing, the only thing, he can say.

Dr Shapiro collects a plastic cup from the side table and holds it out with a straw for Will to sip from. Will manages to lift his head just enough to suck down a few mouthfuls, the tepid liquid more refreshing than the coldest beer he's ever tasted.

It's nectar, but it's not what he really needs.

'The baby?' he croaks, golden eyes locked onto the Alpha's gentle face. 'My baby?'

'Will… what do you remember?' Shapiro asks, scribbling down vital signs as he watches for signs of regression. It wouldn't be the first time, after all.

'I…' Will's breath fails and he sags, closing his eyes again as exhaustion pulls at him. 'Hannibal…'

He cut me. Sliced me open. Killed our children.

'He was your Alpha,' Shapiro offers, and Will fights back a flinch at the tense.

Was.

'He, um…' He chews his tongue and blinks away tears, looking up at the doctor again. 'He stabbed me.' He nods, confirming to himself the memory of the attack. 'Cut me… My crest…'

‘You’ve been with us for six months,’ Dr Shapiro says, and Will frowns, confused by the length of time. ‘We had to sedate you for most of that. To keep you alive. Keep you sane.’

Six months…

He remembers a weight in his arms. A pull on his chest; a cry forcing him to wake up.

‘Did my baby survive?’ he whispers, hand closing over his abdomen again. ‘Did…?’

Did Hannibal kill our child, like he killed Abigail?

Dr Shapiro draws closer, checking his pulse, his temperature and his brain activity.

‘You’ve asked that question before,’ he says. ‘The answer might destabilize you again.’

‘I think Hannibal Lecter gutting me and killing my baby destabilized me,’ Will snaps, his eyes flashing gold even as reality shivers and the room begins to blur. Taking a deep breath, he forces his mind to stay fixed in the present, desperate to hold onto the moment, and Dr Shapiro watches, impressed, as he brings himself back from another episode.

‘I think you’re ready for a visitor,’ the doctor says, smiling gently. ‘Feel up to it?’

‘Who?’ Will asks, resigning himself to FBI Agents swarming the room now that he’s awake and stable enough to answer questions.

‘Well,’ Dr Shapiro says, holding open the door for a nurse to walk inside, carrying a baby wrapped in pink. ‘That’s for you to decide.’

That’s… That’s my…

Will’s mind freezes and his heart stops.

Six months. He’s been here for six months, and he was three months pregnant when Hannibal cut him. So his baby, his precious little girl, she must have been born at eight months, ahead of schedule but not dangerously so, waiting for Will to wake again and remain conscious to care for her.

‘Will, meet your daughter,’ the nurse says, speaking softly so as not to startle either patient. She can see the rapid fluttering of the Omega’s pulse, the sheen of panicked sweat on his forehead, but so far, he remains awake and steady enough for her to trust him with the newborn.

She leans down to show Will the baby’s sleeping face.

‘Would you like to hold her?’ she offers, and it’s like a switch. Will starts to sob, scrabbling to sit upright, dragging on the wires and gasping in pain at the pull on his half-healed cesarean scar. The sound wakes the baby and she begins to kick, plaintive little cries getting louder the more agitated they both become.

‘Please,’ Will begs, reaching for his little girl. ‘Please, please, let me have her.’

‘Alright, just relax,’ the nurse says. ‘You won’t do any of us any good if you pop another stitch.’

She raises the head of the bed for Will to sit up and then hands the baby over, showing him how to support her. At a month older, the little girl is a lot less fragile than she had been, but she’s still delicate.

Is this real?

Will stares through a haze of tears, his ears filled with the sound of rushing water. He hushes her, his red-faced, furious little girl, rocking her gently until she calms, and then dips his nose to her forehead, sucking up the smell of her and comforting her in his own scent. She smells like hospital laundry detergent, sterile wipes and nappy cream… Bottled milk, nurse’s subtle perfume and, beneath all of that, a faint echo of his and Hannibal’s scent.

Born in blood.

She’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen.

‘How…?’ he whispers, drowning in the blue of her eyes, stroking a finger down her pink cheek. ‘How did I make you?’

‘It was where he cut you,’ the nurse says, her hands twitching into fists at the mere idea of an Alpha doing such a thing to a pregnant Omega, least of all his *own* Omega. ‘You carry your womb lower than most males, honey, so the knife nicked the top part of the placenta, but not enough to cause a miscarriage.’

‘It was an accident?’ Will breathes, still gazing at his daughter, hardly able to believe that this is happening.

Hannibal *never* makes accidents. He always knows *exactly* what he was doing. Nothing is by mistake.

‘You are *my* design,’ Will whispers, memorizing every inch of the perfect little face staring back at him. ‘My baby… My little girl…’

‘She’s quite the fighter,’ the nurse says, smiling down at her charge. ‘She and her brother, both.’

Will’s chest flips and he can’t help but lift his head.

‘Brother?’ He stares at the nurse, certain he’s imagining things, but she grimaces at her own blunder.

‘Of course, honey; you went to sleep again, I’m so sorry.’ She pulls an iPad from her pocket and opens the camera feed for the incubator in the ICU nursery. ‘Not as strong as his sister yet,’ she explains, showing Will the color image of a newborn boy lying in a glass chamber, strapped to nearly as many devices as his father. ‘But he’s coming along just fine.’

‘What’s wrong with him?’ Will asks, fear making him hoarse, spiking his temperature and setting off a chain reaction of alarms. ‘I want to see him.’

‘There’s no rush, sugar,’ the nurse coos, glancing at the monitors in concern. Will presses a shaky kiss to his daughter’s plump, soft cheek, trying to soothe himself with her presence as the nurse adds, ‘His lungs are just a bit under-developed, but he’s doing really well.’

‘I want to see him,’ Will repeats, glaring up at the Beta standing between him and his pup. ‘Now.’

An alarm pings again and the nurse steps closer. Will tries to fight but his limbs are too heavy. His brain splinters, the knife stabs deep, and the last thing he remembers is the baby being tugged from his arms.

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He wakes to the sound of a scratchy voice humming an out-of-tune lullaby. It’s the same one his Pops used to sing to him when he was a boy, and when he’d first gone into Heat as a teenager.

The sound is comforting, and Will smiles as he slowly comes back to consciousness.

‘Gotta stay with us, Willy,’ Bill Graham says, barely more than a whisper so as not to wake the grandbaby sleeping in his arms. ‘These pups need a mom.’

‘I’m their father,’ Will replies, but there’s no bite to his voice. He’s just glad to be awake and in the same room as his family. Semantics don’t matter right now. ‘How long was I gone this time?’

‘Just a few hours,’ Bill says, smiling at him as he rocks the sleeping babe. ‘You’re gettin’ better at stayin’ tethered.’

‘Did I dream about my son?’ Will asks, his heart hurting at the idea that it could have been false. ‘Was that real?’

Is any of this real?

‘That was real,’ Bill assures him. He adjusts the weight of the baby in his arms and reaches out to hold Will’s hand on top of the blankets. ‘He’s sleepin’, like you need to.’

‘Can I hold her again?’ Will pleads, tears welling and spilling over to roll down his cheeks. ‘Just for a little while?’

Bill considers it for a moment, giving a quick check to the monitors, before he nods and stands up. Easing Will upright again, he places the baby into his son’s arms, stroking through the Omega’s shaggy curls as Will purrs softly to his child.

‘I’m sorry I’ve not been there for you, son,’ Bill says, retaking his seat beside the bed and watching as Will cradles the infant. ‘I know I haven’t been the best father.’

‘You’re here now,’ Will replies, sparing a small, sad smile at the man who’d done his best to raise him. The Beta who’d never understood his Omegan son. ‘That’s all that matters.’

‘You’ve lost your accent,’ Bill says, his own voice thick with his Southern drawl. ‘Don’t hardly recognize you no more.’

‘It’s still there,’ Will assures him, a hint of twang coloring the words. ‘Just subtle; not forgotten.’

His eyelids start to droop and his voice trails away as sleep steals back over him. He stirs the moment his Pops tries to take the baby, though, his arms tightening around the precious bundle.

‘Grace,’ he says, finally releasing her to be carried back to the nursery by her granddaddy. ‘Her name’s Grace.’

‘Like your grandmomma,’ Bill says, his eyes shining with tears at the sentiment. ‘She’d have loved that, Willy.’

‘And Daniel,’ Will says, drifting back into the warm current of his mind, sinking into the feeling of Hannibal’s arms around his waist, and warm lips nuzzling his throat. ‘My son’s name is Daniel.’

***

He dreams of Paris. An apartment with a view of the Eiffel Tower. Garden parties and shopping along the Rue Saint Honoré. Lunch at artisan cafés and dinner at Michelin star restaurants.

He’s having lunch with Hannibal, enjoying the warmth of the late spring day. Sunshine glints off the brand new Ducati *Diavel 1260* parked at the curb, and they each have a helmet under their wicker seats.

‘That’s a mid-life crisis vehicle,’ Will warns, his eyes sparkling with mirth as he teases his Alpha. ‘Rebound bike.’

‘It’s a fine machine,’ Hannibal replies, cutting into a tender strip of garlic chicken breast. ‘You didn’t complain the other night when we parked overlooking the River Seine.’

‘I was a bit distracted,’ Will reasons, smiling around a mouthful of crisp Chardonnay. ‘If you recall.’

‘With perfect clarity,’ Hannibal purrs, his eyes flickering red with desire. ‘You were magnificent, Will.’

The dream fades without a struggle, and Will opens his eyes to see a nurse smiling down at him. He can still smell garlic, and his belly is full of imagined garlic roasted chicken.

‘Do you want to try some soup, honey?’ the nurse asks, sitting him up and handing him a glass of apple juice. ‘It’s chicken.’

Silkie chicken in a broth. A black-boned bird, prized in China for its medicinal values since the 7th century. Wolfberries, ginseng, ginger, red dates and star anise.

You made me chicken soup?

Yes.

He declines, his stomach twisting at the idea of eating anything not cooked by Hannibal. The next meal is beef casserole, but the meat is so tough compared to the tender strips prepared by his Alpha, the potato so bland and the vegetables so salty that he barely chokes down half the portion before nausea overwhelms him.

It's easier when he doesn't dream about the other man. The days are filled with physical therapy – swimming to build up the muscles wasted from months in bed – and learning how to prepare milk for Daniel and Grace, how to feed and wind them, and how to change their diapers.

Daniel leaves the ICU after another week, his little lungs put to good use when he cries through the first three nights in the room with his father and sister.

Bill stays with them, quietly supportive as Will manages twins as a single parent. They're careful not to mention Hannibal, Will's constant dreams about him, or the question of his guardianship hanging over their heads.

Days become weeks. Weeks become months and then, one day, Will wakes from a nap – in which he and Hannibal had been at a terraced garden party at the Ritz, flirting over champagne as Hannibal hunted Dr Roman Fell – to the strangest sense of déjà vu. He frowns as he comes back to consciousness, light and shadow coalescing into a single, shocking figure.

'Abigail?'

The Beta smiles at him, her auburn hair hanging loose about her shoulders, wearing sweatpants and a vest top, her throat still covered in gauze.

'What…?' Will sits up straighter in bed, cursing his tender abdomen, wishing he hadn't overdone it earlier in the pool. '*How…?*'

'They said he knew exactly how to cut me,' Abigail says, and Will shudders as he remembers the sound of the knife cutting through her skin. 'They said it was surgical.' She raises an eyebrow. 'He wanted us to live.'

'He left us to die,' Will mutters, his eyes flashing gold at the thought of what Hannibal had done. What he'd nearly *cost* him.

My babies. My miracles.

'But we didn't,' Abigail replies, shrugging one shoulder. She comes closer and sits on the edge of the bed, light as a feather. 'He was supposed to take me with him,' she says. 'We were all supposed to leave together. He made a place for us.'

She sounds robotic; colder and harsher than she had been in Baltimore. She's furious; maybe that it had been such a long time since that night, that she'd had to wait so long to see him.

Why does she still have the bandage on her throat?

'Abigail…' Will starts, but the Beta just turns to him, her blue eyes boring into his skull, making his temples throb.

'Why did you lie to him?' she demands, and Will closes his eyes in pain. He hasn't felt this in a long time. Not since the labor…

It's dark on the other side, mylimasis. And madness is waiting.

'The wrong thing being the right thing to do was… Too ugly a thought.' He swallows, forcing back a whine, and offers his surrogate daughter a painful smile. It's a silent plea for mercy, for kindness, but Abigail doesn't smile back. She just frowns at him; a wrathful angel sent to punish him.

'He gave you a chance to take it all back,' she says. 'And you just *kept* lying. No one had to die.'

Will lifts his eyes to the ceiling, desperately fighting tears.

No one had to die… Does that mean… Is this real? Are my babies real?

'It's hard to grasp,' he murmurs, fighting the pull of the current threatening to drown him once more in madness; 'what would have happened… could've happened… in some other world… *did* happen.'

We all left together; we flew to Paris and Hannibal bought a motorcycle… He taught Abigail how to play the piano and I delivered our babies in a French hospital, with my Alpha and my daughter beside me. We're in Florence, now… We chose the apartment together.

'I'm having a hard enough time dealing with this world,' Abigail replies, rolling her eyes. 'I hope some of the other worlds are… easier on me.'

Will stares at the tiles above him, hearing the trickle of water over pebbles, his sense of self unraveling from his consciousness. One thread, then two, then three, until the tapestry begins to collapse.

'Everything that *can* happen, happens,' he murmurs, fast losing awareness of his words, his voice a flat monotone, his ears deaf to the warning of the EEG still tracking his brainwaves. 'It has to end well… And it has to end badly…' He pants, fire licking through his veins as the current swells, tugging him to sink back into the blissful depths of nothingness.

It's so much simpler when I'm asleep.

'It has to end,' he manages, 'every way it can.'

He looks back at Abigail; at his beautiful adopted daughter, the viper in his nest. She's a fledgling monster, and her allegiance lies with Hannibal, not with him.

'This is the way it ended for us,' he finishes, expecting and receiving the head shake of refute from his companion.

'We don't *have* an ending,' Abigail says. 'He didn't give us one yet.' She dips her chin, blue eyes boring into Will's face, slithering between the cracks of his psyche and stirring the deepest, most primal parts of himself. 'He wants us to find him.'

I have to find him.

It's a howl; a distant call to rejoin the pack. Their family is broken, and Will needs to make it whole again.

But there's resistance. Hesitation, which Will now gives voice to.

'After everything he's done… you'd still go to him?'

Abigail nods, still staring at him with the fierce, insane intensity of the devoted.

'If everything that can happen happens, then you can never really do the wrong thing.' She reaches out and gives his hand a squeeze. 'You're just doing what you're supposed to.'

***

I'm waiting for you, Will. Come find me.

Having fed, changed and settled both Daniel and Gracie without help from his dad or the nurse, Will takes a sedative to help him sleep that night. But, despite the drowsiness stealing over him, fogging his thoughts and making everything blurry, he can't stop remembering his conversation with Abigail, and the feelings she had evoked when she'd said that Hannibal was waiting for them.

A place was made for all of us.

The back of his neck itches under the dressing. Will hasn't been able to look at it yet, but the nurses who change the bandages tell him that his crest is healing nicely. It's still scarred, but they expect the skin to recover by the end of the year. He might even regain sensation there, if he's lucky.

Now, though, the skin burns with a thousand fire ants. Will grits his teeth, trying to ignore it, telling himself it isn't real. It isn't possible. He focuses on the steady blip of his heart rate, watching the green line spike up on the black screen with every beat.

The itch changes. Moves, nipping its way down his spine until it settles in his abdomen. It calms for a while, allowing him to doze, and then –

I have to find him.

Muscle rips, flesh tears and Will jerks awake. There's something sharp pushing up from underneath his stitches. He groans, pressing a hand to the bandages, his pulse quickening at the dampness oozing through the layers of gauze.

A monitor blips as the cotton snaps. Will stares, horrified, as an antler forces its way out of his body, glistening with blood, razor-sharp and perfect for killing.

We're just alike.

He sits up, scrambling for the button to call the nurse, but before he can reach for it, he realizes he's in Hannibal's office. His hand falls away from the remote and he stares at the familiar room, filling his lungs with the smell of leather, dust and books.

With the smell of *Hannibal*.

It's exactly the same as he remembers; tall windows flanked by red and grey striped curtains, dark floor and mezzanine library. Expensive furniture and a Persian rug beneath his hospital bed.

This is where the chaise lounge used to be… He fucked me on that; forced me to take his knot even as he broke my mind.

The canular in the back of his hand is irritating, and Will rips it out. He kicks the covers off, sweating under the layers. When he swings his legs out of the bed, he's wearing the blue shirt, navy pants and brown boots of the last day they'd been in this room together.

You smelled Freddie Lounds on me, and you knew I was lying.

He'd been so careful… So meticulous until that point. But he'd grown complacent, and it had cost him everything.

He gave me a chance, and I just kept lying.

Sheets of paper fall from the ceiling, riding the current of warm air to twist and turn their way to the floor. Will snatches one from above him, staring at the wonky clock with numbers sliding off the side, and he remembers how lost, his terrified he'd felt at the thought of losing his mind.

Did I ever recover from that? Was there ever any chance I could come back from such abuse?

The paper singes, blackening around a point of light, and then fire bursts through from behind, eating away the evidence of his history with Hannibal.

You thought you were helping me. In your own way, you were showing me you cared.

They'd burned a lot of books that day. The fireplace had been crammed with paper, flames greedily consuming Hannibal's neat, precise lines of writing.

'When we're gone from this life,' Hannibal says, his voice echoing through the hallways of Will's memory; 'I will always have this place.'

Will sees himself, sees them both; his strong, handsome Alpha and the conniving Omega beside him, each man cast half in light, half in shadow as they destroy evidence ahead of the FBI search.

‘In your “memory palace”?’ Will had asked, but he hadn’t understood, then.

He understands, now. It’s so clear, and it’s wonderful.

‘My palace is vast,’ Hannibal replies, ‘even by medieval standards.’

Watching from between the leather chairs where he had given himself, body and soul, to the Chesapeake Ripper, Will mouths along to the words spoken by his former mate.

‘The foyer is the Norman Chapel in Palermo,’ Hannibal explains. ‘Severe and beautiful and timeless. With a single reminder of mortality. A skull, graven in the floor.’

Memento mori. Remember that you must die.

The Will from that day turns his head, his eyes glowing an eerie gold as he stares straight at himself.

The current Will’s skin pebbles, fine hairs standing on end and a scream lodging in his throat.

What do you see?

The paper gathers like water on the floor, obscuring the ancient mosaic tiles now replacing wooden boards. As Hannibal and Will continue their conversation by the fire, slipping back into memory, Will crouches down to push drawings of melted clocks away from the skull he can see, staring up at him from beneath his feet.

Come find me.

Reality shifts, his vision shaking, and Will looks up, up and up and up, to see the high, domed ceiling of the Chapel.

‘Let it be a fairytale, then,’ Hannibal says, and he tugs Will around by the shoulder. ‘Once upon a time –’

They’re dancing in a ballroom together, to the jaunty, charismatic notes of a string quartet playing Beethoven. Glasses clink and low voices murmur compliments as the *Palazzo Capponi* gather to share the news on whether or not their latest applicant will join their ranks as Curator.

Hannibal looks magnificent as ever in his tuxedo, and Will folds himself into his strong arms as they twirl across the marble tiles. He tries not to, but he can’t keep from looking down every few steps, muttering the one-two-three beat under his breath to keep from tripping or stepping on his Alpha’s toes. The Omegan tuxedo is snug about his waist, tighter than he’d like, but at least the mangled scar of his crest is hidden away beneath the collar, unlike most of the other napes in the room.

‘An Alpha and Omega were terribly in love,’ Hannibal continues, his hungry eyes lingering on Will’s throat. ‘They couldn’t live without each other.’

‘They were slaves to their emotions,’ Will replies, warning Hannibal not to act on his desires. ‘Reckless as animals.’

‘And they lived happily ever after,’ Hannibal finishes, his lips brushing his cheekbone before spinning him out and bringing him back up against his warm body. ‘For the rest of their lives.’

‘I can’t get you out of my head,’ Will murmurs, holding the side of Hannibal’s face and stroking his eyebrow with his thumb. ‘You’re always with me.’

‘Forever, *mylimasis*,’ Hannibal breathes, and they kiss, their purrs mingling in perfect harmony with the music of the quartet.

‘Should’ve taken more lessons,’ Will grumbles, but he can’t help feel a flicker of pride as he matches Hannibal step for step in the next verse, keeping up with him until the very last second, when the Alpha decides to spin, turn and bend him backwards over his arm.

The watching crowd applause the bold move, but Will feels his cheeks burn in humiliation at being treated like such an *Omega*, and his belly cramps in ripping agony.

The antler… The stitches…

Getting his feet under him, Will gives Hannibal a shove, but the insufferable man simply lifts an eyebrow and gazes at him with open adoration.

‘*Bellissimo*,’ the Alpha purrs, the heat in his eyes deepening Will’s blush.

In a desperate bid to calm himself, Will straightens his shirt and jacket, shaking his head when Hannibal collects a glass of wine from a passing waiter and offers it to him. He takes half a step back so that the taller man is in front of him when the *Capponi* scholars approach, en-masse.

I’m supposed to feed the twins soon… Daniel needs another injection, and I wanted to be there for him.

The voices fade; a dull hum broken only by the blip of a heart monitor. Will frowns, turning to search for the incongruous sound, feeling on the verge of knowing something and then losing it.

The ballroom has become a static scene, the light blurred at the edges. Alphas and Omegas hold position where they are, flutes still fizzing with prosecco but no life in their limbs to drink it.

This… This is a dream… I’m dreaming again…

‘Come back to us, son.’

His Pops stands by the ballroom doors, dressed in his usual fishing gear, a rod in his hands and cap on his head. Will frowns, sensing a way home, a way out, and he tries to move closer.

Water stops him. He's standing in a stream, protected from the cold by waders up to his waist, soft pebbles shifting under his feet as he tries to plant himself more securely.

I am bedrock.

'I've got you, kiddo,' his father whispers, taking hold of his hand and holding tight. 'I'm right here.'

'There's something in the water,' Will says, unable to tear his eyes from the shape unfolding in the depths of the river before him. 'Dad…?'

'Will…' It's not his father's voice by his ear, but Hannibal's. 'Look at me.'

Will blinks, coming back to himself with a shiver. They're in their apartment; a glittering array of rooms with views of the River Arno from every eastern window. The babysitter has gone, and they're in the living room. Will has a carafe of brandy in his hand, two glasses before him, and he has removed his tux jacket and tie.

This isn't my dream, he realizes, pouring amber liquid into crystal tumblers. *It's Hannibal's. He misses me.*

'We are among the palaces built six hundred years ago,' Hannibal murmurs, gazing out at the beautiful architecture of his beloved city; 'by the merchant princes, the king-makers and the connivers of Renaissance Florence.'

'There are connivers of modern Florence,' Will replies, stepping up beside him and handing him a glass of *grappa*.

Hannibal smiles and looks past him, to the frescoed walls and ceilings of cherubs and devils, ornate brass-work and windows leaded from centuries past.

'I've found a peace here I would preserve,' the Alpha admits, sipping his drink. 'I've killed hardly anybody during our residence.'

'You created a vacancy at the *Palazzo Capponi*,' Will points out, undoing the top two buttons of his shirt. He's too warm. Is it fever? He wishes the cold water was back. 'By removing the former Curator.'

'A simple process,' Hannibal brags. 'Requiring a few second's work on the old man. And,' he adds, as an afterthought; 'a modest outlay for two bags of cement.'

'You no longer have *ethical* concerns, Hannibal.' Will shakes his head and sips his own drink, but he's just as thirsty as before, his throat scratched and sore, his tongue too big for his mouth. 'You have *aesthetical* ones.'

'Ethics become aesthetics,' Hannibal muses, tipping his head back to admire the painting on the ceiling above them.

‘You seem more interested in *making* appearances than maintaining them,’ Will growls, turning back to the Alpha. He’s angry; there’s a rage inside him that twists like a living thing. A serpent of hate.

The snake ate me, and now I am the monster. Gored and eviscerated, twisted into something I don’t recognize.

‘If this is about my position at the *Palazzo*,’ Hannibal remarks; ‘once the path was cleared, I won the job fairly. On my merits.’

Will rolls his eyes, restless and irritable. He sets the brandy aside, since it does nothing to help him, and unbuttons the rest of his shirt, dragging the zipper of his pants down with a sound that is too loud in the suddenly brittle silence between them.

I want my children. This isn’t real…

‘Yes,’ he sneers. ‘Even the most *contentious* Florentines can’t resist the verse of Dante ringing off the frescoed walls.’

He heads for the bathroom, swaying slightly, his head fuzzier than he’d expected, ears filled with the shrill beeping of an alarm. He hears his dad’s voice, muffled and far too close, and he tries to hold up a hand to ward him away.

‘What’s happening?’ Bill Graham demands, panic making him hoarse. ‘What’s *happening?’*

Have the doctors drugged me, or is it something else?

Water pours from the brass fish taps of the bathtub, but it’s too hot. It’s all too hot. Will is too hot; he just wants to cool down.

Am I… in Heat?

‘Put your head back,’ Hannibal whispers, guiding him into the bathtub, easing him down into the scalding water. ‘Close your eyes. Wade into the quiet of the stream.’

‘Hannibal…’ Will’s voice catches and he reaches for his Alpha. His arm twitches, water splashing, but he’s alone. He’s alone and it’s dark, it’s all dark.

It’s dark on the other side. And madness is waiting.

He’s been here before. He doesn’t want to go back. He can’t go back. He can’t go back to that place; that dark, anchorless place. His babies need him…

The water closes in on him, tight as a strap. His neck flares with pain, even as razors slide through his skull, and Will can hear the desperate thumping of his heartbeat, fighting to stay alive.

I’m still in conscious control of my actions… Today is a good day… You were supposed to leave… Hannibal…

‘We’re losing him…’ A distant voice… Male, but not his father… They sound worried… It cuts through the dream and pain flares as he hears the blip of a heart monitor. ‘10ccs of Phenobarbital… Increase the nuchal pressure… Will, can you hear me? Will? Can you –?’

Will takes a deep breath and dips beneath the surface of the bath. Water flows up his nose, into his ears… It batters his eyelids, suffocating him.

He’s dying. His lungs are burning, too small for his body. His stomach cramps and all he tastes is blood.

There was so much blood…

The teacup shatters.

He sinks, fading, collapsing into the smallest pieces of himself.

‘No forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love.’

He remembers laughing with Hannibal in the motel room; the first meal they ever shared. Remembers kissing him in his office. Hannibal mounting him; claiming him after fighting Tobias for him. Hannibal, feeding him Abigail’s severed ear. Hannibal, locking him up to protect him up to protect Will from his darkness.

A thousand twisted demonstrations of love from a man too broken to function.

I should have killed you when I had the chance.

‘A place was made for all of us.’

The teacup shatters.

‘Time did reverse,’ Hannibal murmurs, hugging him close as their bond collapses, the beautiful cherub-painted room of their memory palace fading forever. ‘The teacup that I shattered did come together.’

The babies survived… They survived… I’ve held them. Fed them. Watched them sleep. Please… Please let me wake up so I can be with them.

He can’t leave. Can’t get away from that night. He clings to his Alpha, whimpering and crying as everything falls away from him.

‘Don’t… No, no, please,’ he begs, but Hannibal continues, heedless of his cries.

‘A place was made for Abigail in your world.’ A hand strokes his hair, scent thick with soothing pheromones to ease his pain. ‘Do you understand?’

I don’t. I don’t understand anything. I’m not here… I’m in the hospital… Please… Please say I’m in the hospital…

Will shakes his head, his breath hitching as cold agony sweeps through him again. He's dizzy, and he squeezes his eyes tightly shut as he hugs Hannibal with desperate abandon, silently screaming for him to stop, to please, *please* just make it *stop*.

I never wanted this.

'A place was made for all of us,' Hannibal whispers, his voice breaking with emotion. 'Together.'

The teacup shatters.

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'"A soft and fluffy Velveteen Rabbit lived in a toybox in a Boy's room",' says Bill Graham, reading to both his comatose son and the two grandbabies sleeping in the crib beside him. '"Each day, the Boy opened the toybox and picked up Velveteen Rabbit. And Velveteen Rabbit was happy."'

He sighs, rubbing at the stubble on his cheeks, and turns the page of the battered old children's book; Will's favorite story from childhood, and one of the few things given to him by his momma.

'"Then newer, brighter toys came into the toybox,"' he continues, his voice wobbling with emotion. '"They had special tricks. Some could move when the Boy pushed a button. Others bounced high. Velveteen Rabbit had no special tricks or buttons. No wonder the Boy started to choose these other new toys."'

The blue lines of the EEG spike, exceeding the average parameters, and Bill pauses as the monitor sounds an alert. His own heart skips a beat, panic battling hope that, this time, Will might wake up.

Drawn from the shadows, using his father's voice as a beacon in the darkness, Will fumbles his way out of the twisting, endless corridors of Hannibal's memory palace. Retracing his steps through the paper-strewn office, he comes back to the hospital, back to his babies. Back to his life and his hope.

'Hey, kiddo.' Bill brushes more tears from his face as Will opens his eyes. His son's gaze is distant and unfocused from the drugs, but there's an awareness there that he hasn't seen in weeks. 'We're just havin' a bedtime story.'

'The Velveteen Rabbit.' Will smiles, his heart aching with love at the comforting presence of his dad. 'I love that story.'

'I know,' Bill whispers. 'So does Danny.'

'I'm sorry,' Will breathes, trying to reach for his dad's hand, his lower lip wobbling and tears falling as he stares past the Beta to the vulnerable babies he'd abandoned again. 'I'm so sorry.'

‘Hey, hey, it’s not your fault, kiddo.’ Bill sets the book aside and stands up. He bends over Will’s body, hugging him as best he can around the wires, and Will nuzzles up into the crook of his neck, comforting himself with the scent of Old Spice, smoke and whiskey. ‘None o’ this is your fault, son.’

‘I couldn’t stay,’ Will sobs, heedless of the fact that he’s crying like a child, crying as badly as the first time he went into Heat. ‘I can’t fight it, Dad. It’s too strong.’

‘You’re stronger, Will,’ Bill promises. He withdraws from the hug, hushing Will before he sets off another episode. He hands him a bunch of tissues from the side table, urging Will to dab his eyes and blow his nose. ‘You’re the toughest son’a’bitch I know.’

‘Was I in Heat?’ Will asks thickly, glancing up as a nurse enters the room with Dr Shapiro. ‘It felt like Heat.’

‘It was… a version of Heat,’ Dr Shapiro explains. ‘We think your visitor may have triggered a regression, so we’ve restricted guests back to immediate family only, for now.’

Abigail is my immediate family, Will thinks, but he’s too tired to argue. He just nods, and holds his Dad’s hand as he stares at his children.

‘I was with Hannibal,’ he says, hating the way his Pops flinches at the name. ‘I was *with* him…’

It felt real.

‘It’s common to relive certain events, or think about certain people, when you have PTSD,’ Dr Shapiro offers. ‘If you’re ready to talk about it, we have an excellent psychiatrist who specializes in Severed Bond Trauma.’

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Severed Bond Trauma. Is that all it is? Why can I feel him with me? Why does his presence still feel… good?

‘My chest hurts,’ Will says, moving the conversation away from such dangerous waters. ‘And my throat.’

‘Your heart stopped,’ Dr Shapiro says. ‘And we had to intubate you again.’

‘Some recovery, huh?’ Will rolls his eyes at his own fragility, his own step backwards, but everyone in the room shakes their heads.

‘No, son,’ Bill says. ‘You brought yourself back. You always bring yourself back.’

‘I won’t lie to you, Will,’ Dr Shapiro adds. ‘You’ll likely experience mild forms of these episodes for the rest of your life. What you’ve gone through… well, many Omegas haven’t come back from what you’ve experienced.’

‘Should’ve stuck to fixing boat motors in Louisiana,’ Will mutters; an echo of a conversation before his mind was swallowed whole by a monster.

‘A boat engine is a machine,’ Hannibal had said. ‘A predictable problem, easy to solve. You fail, there’s a paddle.’

Where is your paddle now?

‘He was supposed to be my paddle,’ Will whispers, rubbing the blanket back and forth between his fingers. ‘Not run me ashore.’

I’m still your paddle, Will. If you’ll let me.

‘You need to sleep,’ Dr Shapiro says, nodding for the nurse to guide a distressed-looking Bill Graham from the room. ‘It’s all going to be okay, Will.’

‘I know,’ Will says, his eyes slipping shut even as the doctor wheels his babies away. ‘I know it will.’

Because I’m going to find him. Just as soon as I can.

***

THREE MONTHS LATER

A match flares, phosphorus burning bright in the darkness. Will turns his head, watching a nun light a prayer candle, and then he looks back up the aisle to the front of the Norman Chapel, to the altar and the crucifix above it.

‘Even in an enlightened world,’ he murmurs, speaking to the young Beta girl beside him; ‘we come here to feel closer to God.’

He’s wearing his glasses again; dark jeans, boots and a summer jacket. It’s nothing fancy; he’s back to his country staples, but the pockets are deep and it has silk sewn into the collar to protect his neck.

‘Do you feel closer to God?’ Abigail asks, grinning at him as Will drinks in the sights of the physical version of his Alpha’s memory palace.

This is where it all began. The first room. The foyer. The mouth of my personal hell.

‘God’s not who I came here to find,’ Will whispers, and he moves on, walking ever closer to the front of the pews, drawn towards the skull graven into the floor.

Memento mori.

‘Do you… believe in God?’ Abigail asks, tapping her palms against the sides of her legs. Churches make her uncomfortable, and she’d rather be back outside, sipping lemonade under the hot Italian sun.

‘What I believe,’ Will replies, ‘is closer to science fiction than anything in the Bible.’

‘We all know it, but nobody ever says that G/d won’t do a G/d-damned thing to answer anybody’s prayers,’ Abigail says, rolling her eyes at all the people with their hands clasped around them.

‘God can’t *save* any of us,’ Will explains, turning to face his surrogate daughter. ‘Because it’s… *inelegant*.’ He smiles, his eyes flashing gold. ‘*Elegance* is more *important* than suffering. That’s His design.’

Abigail smirks at him, her blue eyes like ice.

‘Are you talking about *God* or *Hannibal?’*

Will’s cheeks flush pink and he sniffs a laugh at his own foolishness.

‘Hannibal’s not God,’ he mutters, hands bunched into fists in his jacket pockets. ‘He wouldn’t have any *fun* being God.’ He looks around the chapel again and then turns back to Abigail with a knowing smile. ‘*Defying* God, now that’s his idea of a good time.’

His eye catches the skeleton on the floor; hands clasped together in prayer, faced upturned to the fresco of Jesus Christ and saints above it, eyes hollow and black.

‘Nothing would thrill Hannibal more than to see this roof collapse,’ Will adds, coming to stand directly over the memento mori. ‘Mid-mass… Packed pews, choir singing…’ His lips curl up into a feral smile. ‘He would *just* love it.’

He looks up, examining the dome above them; the painted clay and ceramic, the pillars and wafer thin tiles supporting the arches.

‘And he thinks God would love it, too.’

As he watches, a hairline fracture creeps along the seams of the dome. Dust trickles from the wall and Will frowns, holding out his hand to catch the plaster.

I collect church collapses.

‘Time to go,’ he says, brushing off his palm on his jeans. ‘We’ll come back tomorrow.’

‘Are we gonna call your dad?’ Abigail asks, falling into step beside him as they leave the crumbling ruin. ‘Can we Facetime the twins?’

‘Sure,’ Will says, fastidiously avoiding the gaze of a watching priest. ‘We’ll catch them before they head to nursery.’

‘Race you back to the hotel room,’ Abigail teases, skipping ahead to hail a cab. ‘And then *we* are going out for pizza.’

***

That night, the Broken Man appears in the Norman Chapel.

The skin has been flayed, the bones broken and ribs crushed, limbs twisted and pinned. Impaled on three swords, the overall image is one of a human heart, perfectly balanced over the center of the skull graven into the floor.

Remember that you must die.

The first Will hears about the murder is on the news. By the time he arrives back at the Chapel, the scene has been screened of by the polizia, officers and forensic investigators photographing and dusting the room for any trace of evidence.

The priest, the hem of his black robes stained with blood, speaks softly with a detective, but Will looks beyond them to the faint shadow of a heart-shaped tableau on the other side of the white curtain.

'Is it him?' Abigail asks, keeping behind him, as wary as a deer before a clearing.

Before Will can respond, the detective and the priest both look over, the priest pointing towards him. A police officer spots them in the doorway and jumps to intercept their entrance.

'Per favore, signore,' he says, shooing them away. 'È proibito qui. La cappella è chiusa.'

'Le Manna,' the detective says, interrupting before the officer can evict his suspect. 'Non lasciarlo uscire. Voglio parlare con lui.'

'What did he say?' Will asks, and an English-speaking inspector translates for him.

'He said, he wants to talk to you. Now.'

The police are looking to me for the crime? It's definitely Hannibal.

***

He and Abigail are taken to the Palermo police headquarters; a beautiful building from Renaissance Italy, with vaulted ceilings, green marble floors and sweeping staircases.

It's a bustling station, and Will sits, mostly ignored, whilst the detective completes the paperwork to begin his interview.

Left on a bench in the middle of homicide investigation desks, Will stares down at the cracks in the stone floor before him, resting his mind even as visions of gruesome tableaus flash past his eyes.

What did he leave me? Who did he kill?

His fingers twitch, working imaginary origami; folding and twisting the Vitruvian Man into an anatomically correct human heart.

'Signor Graham…'

A rough voice drags him out of the delusion, and Will blinks, becoming aware of an older, Italian Omega sitting beside him.

‘Chief Investigator Renaldo Pazzi,’ the man says, introducing himself in thickly-accented English. ‘Questura di Firenze.’

‘You’re a long way from Florence,’ Will murmurs, acknowledging him without looking. He knows what he’ll see; a cheap suit, a worn overcoat scented with cigarettes and wine, tanned skin and silvering hair.

‘You’re a long way from Baltimore,’ Inspector Pazzi replies, and that does get Will’s attention. He frowns at him, and the other Omega offers him an apologetic shrug and a smile as he explains, ‘I read everything I can find on FBI profiling methods. I read *all* about your incarceration.’

Will huffs. Great. A judgmental older Omega. Just what he needs.

‘Keep reading,’ he snaps. ‘I was acquitted.’

Inspector Pazzi turns in the seat, draping one arm over the back of the bench, and narrows gold-ringed eyes at him.

‘You come to Palermo,’ he says, ‘and soon, very soon, a body is discovered.’

It looks suspicious.

‘The priest at the Cappella dei Normanni said you have been spending a lot of time there.’

‘I’ve been praying,’ Will lies, looking at him without lifting his eyes. He can’t take making a connection with anybody else right now.

Pazzi hums, cynical but refusing to dispute a man’s faith.

‘There is some comfort in prayer,’ he agrees. ‘It leaves you with the distinct feeling… you’re not alone.’

Does he know?

Will’s eyes flicker upwards, skirting Pazzi’s eyes, and he notices the manila file in his hands. Before he can ask anything further, though, the detective from earlier returns.

‘Signore.’ When Will glances up, the Alpha beckons to him. ‘Vieni con me.’

Will stands up, his belly writhing with nerves. Pazzi nods his farewell, and Will follows the detective into the depths of the station.

***

The interview is grueling but the detective has nothing to go on, and, after an hour of regurgitating the same information – no, he doesn’t know who the victim is, no, he doesn’t

know who killed him, no, he's only been in Palermo for two days, yes, he has an alibi for between the hours of midnight and six this morning – he is free to go.

Abigail is waiting for him in the foyer when Will finally descends the stairs. She smiles, leaning back against a marble pillar, her hands in the pockets of her leather jacket. When Will sees Inspector Pazzi turn from chatting to an officer and make a beeline for him, Abigail rolls her eyes and walks away, leaving him to another difficult conversation.

Law enforcement, Will thinks, coming to a stop before the other Omega. *They're all the same.*

'Is Will Graham here because of the body at the cappella,' Pazzi muses, 'or is the *body* here because of Will Graham?'

'Why are *you* here?' Will asks, adjusting his coat where it's scratching against the stinging patch where his crest used to be.

'I'm like you,' Pazzi replies, shrugging. 'I do what you do.'

Mate to a psychopathic murderer and lose your mind?

'We share the Omegan gift of imagination,' Pazzi explains, and Will frowns, curious about meeting someone else with as much empathy as him.

'Yeah, well, I've got the scars of a man who grabbed his "gift" by the blade,' Will mutters, making to move away.

Renaldo shakes his head.

'You grabbed the wrong end.'

Will chuckles, a bitter sound, and Renaldo comes after him, stalking closer like a lion.

'Those moments when the connection is made,' he purrs, luring Will back like a siren to the rocks. '*That* is my keenest pleasure.'

Mine, too.

Will holds very still, his forehead prickling with sweat, crest scar throbbing.

'Knowing.'

'Knowing,' Pazzi agrees, and he utters a single, beautiful purr. 'Not feeling, not thinking…' He turns to Will with a sigh. 'You *know* who murdered that man and left him in the Cappella Palatina.'

'Don't *you* know?' Will replies, turning back despite himself, his hands pushed deep into his coat pockets. Renaldo wanders closer, shoe heels clacking on the floor, brown eyes ringed with the deep, honeyed gold of a long-mated Omega.

Stable. Happy. Loved.

‘I met him,’ Pazzi says, saving Will from the trickle of water down the stairs. ‘Twenty years ago.’

Alpha.

‘Il Mostro,’ the Florentine says, his scent sharpening with fear at the name. ‘The Monster of Florence. It was his custom to arrange his victims like a beautiful painting.’

Everything he does is beautiful. Ugliness is despicable to him.

‘Il Mostro created images that stayed in my mind,’ Pazzi says, and Will can see the damage done to the other Omega. The horror of his encounter. The chilling beauty, wrapped around such evil. Pazzi pulls a couple of photographs from the manila envelope. ‘Twenty years ago, I was dwelling on a couple found slain in the bed of a pickup truck in Impruneta.’

He hands the image to Will, and the other Omega looks at a flawless scene. An Alpha and Omega, lying on their sides, posed before rigor mortis could lock their limbs in place, eyes pinned open to reveal the colors of their caste.

‘Bodies placed,’ Pazzi murmurs, ‘Garlanded with flowers…’

‘Like a Botticelli,’ Will says, and Pazzi’s eyes gleam.

‘*Exactly* like a Botticelli.’

Will’s reality slides away and he’s there, in a drizzling side street in Florence, staring down at his tableau. His art. His design.

It was a Courtship… There just wasn’t an Omega to Court, at the time.

Twenty years ago, Will had experienced his first Heat.

‘His painting, “Primavera”, still hangs in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence,’ Pazzi says, and Will is once again dragged back to the present by the sound of his voice. ‘Just as it did, twenty years ago.’

The older Omega hands him a photograph of the painting, and the figures from the tableau are immediately recognizable.

‘The garlanded nymph on the right… Flowers streaming from her mouth… *match*.’

‘The Uffizi Gallery,’ Will says, his dark serpent uncoiling for the first time in months to scent the air. ‘That’s where you met “Il Mostro”?’

‘That’s where,’ Pazzi says, pulling a third, smaller photograph from the breast pocket of his coat. ‘I met *this* man.’

Will's world shrinks, the edges of existence closing in until *all* he sees is the man in the photograph. Younger, smoother, but the same sharp cheeks, the same thin, cruel lips, the same dark eyes and soft, blond hair.

Hannibal Lecter.

Hannibal.

Alpha.

Beloved.

'The Monster of Florence,' Pazzi says, as Will stares down at the father of his children; the Chesapeake Ripper and man who broke his mind. 'Come,' the older Omega says, taking him by the elbow. 'I'll drive you back to the cappella.'

***

They enter together, but it's not the Chapel that Will sees. He's in the Uffizi gallery, and the scratch of graphite pencil on paper replaces the ever-present trickle of water.

'Success comes as a result of inspiration,' Pazzi says, speaking over the sound of a young Hannibal Lecter sketching. 'Revelation is the development of an image, first blurred, then coming clear.'

Hannibal is obsessed with traditional art. He loves it. It inspires everything he does.

'To find the inspiration Il Mostro used was a triumph,' Pazzi says. 'I went to the Uffizi and stood before the original "Primavera" day after day, and, most days, I'd see a young Lithuanian man as transfixed by the Botticelli as I was.'

Will can *see* him; he can see Hannibal's slender shoulders, less muscled at twenty-five but his waist just as sharp. The same regal posture, same aristocratic air to him as he draws the "Primavera" in the big pad on his knee.

'As transfixed,' Pazzi continues, 'as I imagined Il Mostro would be… And, every day that I saw him, he would recreate the "Primavera" in pencil, *just* as he did in flesh.'

Pazzi steps in front of him, blocking his view of Hannibal.

'I *knew*,' the older Omega says, and the light returns, the present day returns, and they are back in the Chapel. 'It was the best moment of my life. A moment of epiphany that made me famous… and then ruined me.'

'Ruined you?' Will tilts his head, querying the dramatic statement, and Pazzi shrugs.

'We are not so rigid as your America,' the Italian Omega says. 'But twenty years ago, the word of an Omegan Inspector was still a thing to be doubtful of. In the haste and heat of ambition, the Questura nearly destroyed the young Alpha's home, trying to find evidence.'

Will snorts softly and walks around him, moving to belay the itch in his crest. The police station slides into the Norman Chapel; Pazzi

‘He doesn’t leave evidence,’ he says, and Pazzi nods bitterly.

‘No, he doesn’t.’

‘He eats it,’ Will adds, and Pazzi blanches. Will shrugs, lifting up the red and white-striped tape so he can move closer to the blood-stained skull.

‘Another man,’ Pazzi continues, watching him examine the crime scene, ‘not an innocent man, but innocent of *those* crimes, was a dream suspect. He was convicted on no evidence except his caste and his character. A Beta, lower-class than the Alphas around him.’

Will sighs. He sinks down onto the marble steps before the altar, resting his elbows on his knees as he gazes somewhere around Pazzi’s midriff.

‘Blame has a habit of not sticking to Hannibal Lecter,’ he says wearily, thinking back to his own incarceration, his own claims falling on deaf ears.

‘Hmm.’ Pazzi nods, and lets himself under the tape to move closer. ‘It has a habit of sticking to *you*.’ He holds out the manila envelope, the contents of which he has retained until now. Will looks at him, wary, and then takes it, his fingertips tingling where they touch the paper.

Pazzi walks away, rolling a cigarette to ease his anxiety, leaving the American Omega and former mate of *Il Mostro* to see his latest creation.

Once the footsteps have faded, Will takes a breath, bracing himself, and plucks the full-sized photograph from the envelope.

The craftsmanship is exquisite. He’d expect nothing less, but it still makes his heart skip a beat. Then, as the current rises, the darkness a warm comfort, Will’s pulse slows. It’s strong and steady, filling him with purpose.

Thud. Thud-thud.

Will closes his eyes, slipping into shadow. Reality blurs, the room fades and he floats away from Palermo, away from his own mind into Hannibal’s memory.

Alpha.

He’s not wearing his glasses in this place. This version of the Chapel is a version of Hannibal’s memory palace foyer. The tableau is there, and Will pushes himself up from the steps to walk around the offering.

‘I splintered every bone.’ His voice echoes in the emptiness of the hollow chamber. ‘Fractured them… *dynamically*. Made you malleable.’

Almost as malleable as my beloved’s mind.

‘I skinned you.’ He can hear the rip of flesh as the epidermis leaves the inner layers, the knife working through muscle to the grunts and pants of a determined Alpha. ‘Bent you… Twisted you… And trimmed you.’ He looks at the origami work of flesh. ‘Head, hands, arms and legs...’ He laughs; a cold, twisted thing. ‘A topiary.’

The heartbeat is louder. Will can *see* the glistening blood, congealing on the cooling skin, and he wants to touch it.

He steps closer, careful of the perfectly balanced body on the three swords, his hand outstretched.

‘This is my design.’

The beat stops the moment his fingers touch the heart. Pauses, and then restarts. Will’s throat closes around a lump and he feels tears dance in his golden eyes.

‘A valentine written on a broken man,’ he whispers.

The dream shifts. A serpent slithers through his mind, tugging at his sanity, and Will sees the sides of the heart move.

Thud-thud. Thud-thud.

Fear licks its way up his spine, settling like a razor in his crest. Will tries to wet his lips but there’s no spit in his mouth; it’s all in his armpits and palms.

As he backs away, sensing that something is very, very wrong, the body shudders. One broken arm strains against the cording holding it in place. Ax it snaps, the arm pulls free. Another broken limb breaks the stitches holding it fast, then another…

A scream lodges on his tongue, and Will’s chest shrinks two sizes as the flayed man untwists himself from the pose, vertebrae popping and cracking as it realigns.

It’s a monstrous sight, like a nightmare flower blossoming. The body, still without hands, feet or head, resurrects its form, made all the more horrifying by the black antlers forcing their way through the holes at the ends of each limb.

A bloody hoof slams down onto the tiled floor and Will flinches, gasping in panic. He can’t make himself move; he can’t run away from what’s happening even though he wants to. He needs to. He needs to close his eyes but he can’t. Can’t do anything but watch as the swords drop away with a clatter and antlers grow like thorns from the stem of the neck.

You can’t escape, Will. There’s no escaping what you are. What I made you.

The Ravenstag may have died, but this twisted, malevolent creature is what death has made of it.

It begins to approach, grotesquely misshapen, relentless in its pursuit. Will forces numb feet to move and stumbles backwards, instinctively seeking the safety of the altar, but no matter

how fast he moves, the thing keeps coming after him, gaining on him faster than he can escape.

His heels hit the steps and Will falls backwards, landing hard and jarring his elbow. The antlers are nearly on him, the creature ready to pin him, suffocate him, gore him…

‘Will?’

Abigail’s voice drags him from the hallucination, and Will comes back to himself, sprawled on the steps of the altar, safe from the antlered nightmare and panting hard. What’s worse, though, are the strangled whimpers he can’t help but make; desperate mewls for his Alpha to save him, to comfort and protect him.

Curling over himself, he tucks his knees to his chest and drags his fingers through his hair, his breath steaming up his glasses and sweat mingling with the tears on his cheeks.

‘I *do* feel closer to Hannibal here,’ he gasps, barking a mirthless laugh at his surrogate daughter. ‘God only knows where I’d be without him.’

Sane. Safe at home in Wolf Trap… I wouldn’t have a hideous scar where my crest used to be. Wouldn’t have a smile across my abdomen. Wouldn’t have a tenuous grip on reality… But I wouldn’t have Gracie and Danny, either.

Tugging his glasses off, Will wipes at his damp face, feeling the itch in his eyes as the irises pulse gold with distress.

‘He left us his… er, his broken heart,’ he admits, throat choking around another whimper. Offering his daughter a small, sad smile, he sees only a puzzled frown in return.

‘How did he know we were here?’ Abigail asks, and Will shakes his head, ringing his hands until his knuckles turn white.

‘He didn’t.’ He shakes his head, his breath still shaking, tremors wracking his body. ‘But he knew we would come.’

Abigail’s eyes cloud over with grief.

‘He misses us.’

Will looks up at her, hesitating before shattering her illusions of love from the other man.

‘Hannibal follows several trains of thought at once,’ he explains. ‘Without distraction from any.’ He rolls his eyes. ‘One of the trains is always for his own amusement.’ He gives a shaky, breathy laugh, hardly able to believe that he can still find it in himself to forgive the Alpha for being so fucking selfish and cruel.

When you have nothing and no-one, you center the world around your own desires.

‘He’s playing with us,’ Abigail says dryly, narrowing her eyes, and Will stares up at her, his gaze intense.

'Always.' When Abigail pauses, shifting her weight from foot to foot, Will quirks an eyebrow. 'Still wanna go with him?'

Because if you do, like I do, you have to know exactly who you're following. What you're following.

Abigail sighs, and comes to sit beside him on the steps. She turns to face him, her lips curving into a tiny smile.

'Yes.'

We belong together.

Will stares across the chapel, not really seeing anything. He has his hands clasped loosely over his bent knees, his glasses dangling from one finger and thumb, body slowly cooling as his idea of reality reforms.

'He gave you back to me,' he murmurs, speaking to Abigail without looking at her. 'Then he took you away.' He lifts his eyes to the ceiling. 'It's Lucy and the football. He just… keeps pulling you away.'

I loved that show as a kid… Now, it makes me feel sick to think of Charlie Brown, flat on his back, injured and betrayed by someone he thought he could trust.

A tear rolls down his cheek, splashing from his jaw to the marble tiles between his boots.

'What if no-one died?' he whispers. 'What if… What if we all left together? Like we were supposed to.' He sniffs, pressing his palms flat together in prayer. 'After he served the lamb… Where would we have gone?'

Abigail smiles sadly.

'In some other world?'

Will sniffs again, wiping his cheeks and offering her a crooked grin.

'In some other world,' he agrees.

'He said he made a place for us,' Abigail whispers, and Will can't lie anymore. He can't pretend. His shattered psyche is healing, and it's time to let her go.

'A place *was* made for you, Abigail… In this world. It was the only place I *could* make for you…'

Even as he watches, Abigail grows pale, her skin growing white and waxy. The healed scar on her throat darkens, a slice of red against the pale column of her neck, and blood begins to flow.

Neither of them make a move to stop it. It isn't real, after all.

Will closes his eyes, blocking out the sight of his daughter, dying just as she did back in Hannibal's kitchen, almost a year ago.

I'm sorry. I can't hold onto you anymore.

He's alone in the chapel. He'd travelled to Italy alone. He calls the twins by himself, checking in on them and their grandfather every day.

But he's searching for Hannibal by himself. Abigail Hobbs was fated to die in a kitchen, and Hannibal Lecter made that destiny a reality.

***

Bellissimo.

Will's pain has always been a thing of beauty. Hannibal could watch him suffer for hours, just as he could watch him climax with pleasure.

High above the altar, hidden behind a lattice-worked wooden screen, Hannibal stares down at his former mate, his Omega, his beloved.

Will sits, stoic and silent, on the steps of the Chapel, his scent still sour with fear over whatever hallucination had him crying out for his Alpha. It had been difficult, restraining himself from going to him, and Hannibal can feel the scratch of his shirt against the front of his throat as the skin reacts to the pheromones leaking from the other man.

Soon, my love, he thinks. *I'll see you soon.*

***

THEN

'He's breathing! I've got a pulse!'

Two paramedics lift the wounded Omega onto a stretcher, swallowing down vomit at the sight of his wounds. They fit an oxygen mask over his face, and Will cracks one eye open just enough to see Abigail, chalk-white and lifeless, being swallowed by a black vinyl chrysalis.

'Baby,' he manages, his voice barely audible. 'My baby…'

'Pregnant? Are you pregnant?' The lead paramedic almost drops the stretcher in shock, and his partner snarls in fury at the blunder.

'Get him in the ambulance,' the Alpha demands. 'Now!'

Will watches as the body bag closes over Abigail, the zipper sealing her in, stealing her away from him. His gut cramps, his pulse fluttering, and his mind surrenders to the darkness.

I'm sorry.

***

The first round of surgery is brutal. Four trauma surgeons and two Omega specialists work on Will for more than ten hours, stabilizing his body enough to save the lives inside him.

His body is in shock, and they do everything they can to keep him warm, even as the heartbeats in his ruptured womb flutter and fade.

When he seizes, it takes an electric pulse placed directly into the mangled flesh of his nuchal tissue to sedate him, his tortured mind too far gone to respond to conventional drugs.

The damage is repaired, the twin fetuses secured and a coma induced.

It will be a long time before he wakes again. If he ever does.

***

NOW

Lying on his back, stretched out down the length of the altar steps, Will gazes up at the frescoed ceiling. He can hear water, slow and steady, and he basks in the current of his broken mind, savoring the shadows coalescing around his form.

He has no idea how long he's been here. How long since his hallucination. He's calm, now, and his pulse doesn't change even when he hears Inspector Pazzi's distinctive footsteps approaching once again.

'Are you… praying?' the other Omega asks, eyeing him doubtfully but respectful of another man's belief.

'Hannibal doesn't pray,' Will replies. 'But he believes in God…' His eyes flicker gold. *'Intimately*.'

Renaldo frowns, unnerved by the flat, hard tone of the younger man.

'I wasn't asking Hannibal Lecter.'

Are you that far gone? Are you one and the same, now?

He lifts the tape and steps onto the scene, standing over the prone Omega.

Will sighs.

'I think my prayers would feel… *constricted* by the saints and apostles,' he says, rising onto his elbows, throwing a sneer back over his shoulder. 'And Jesus *Pantocrator*.'

Almighty. All-powerful. Mankind's judge.

‘How do *your* prayers feel?’ he asks, pushing himself back up onto his feet.

‘I hope my prayers escaped,’ Pazzi replies. ‘Flown from here to the open sky and God.’

‘Praying you catch him?’ Will chews his tongue. ‘You should be praying *he* doesn’t capture *you*.’

Pazzi sniffs a bitter laugh.

‘I didn’t head the Questura di Firenze for nothing,’ he says, turning to the young American.

Will bares his teeth at him.

‘You couldn’t catch him when he was just a kid; what makes you think you’re gonna catch him now?’

Pazzi smiles, his dark eyes gleaming.

‘You.’

Will turns away, following the sound of trickling water towards the gated pulpit under the stairwell.

‘What makes you think *I* want to catch him?’ he murmurs, distracted by the scent of something elusive, something *delicious* in the still air.

Pazzi says something, but the words blur and turn to meaningless sound – blood seeping over stone – as Will stares at the doors below. The flickering candlelight lends an ominous appearance to the entrance to the catacombs, but Will isn’t afraid.

He’s here. Alpha.

Blood begins to seep from underneath the wooden door, oozing across the tiles in time to the rhythmic thud of Will’s heart. His dark current rises, pressing against his legs, urging him forwards, and his crest tingles with unseen fingers brushing back and forth over the gnarled flesh.

‘If you could… *possibly* be content,’ Will breathes, unable to tear his gaze away from the sight of so much blood, so much death, but still desperate to warn the fellow Omega; ‘I would suggest you let *Il Mostro* go.’

‘I can’t do that anymore than you can,’ Pazzi replies, watching with interest as the younger Omega stares at something only he can see; something both beautiful and frightening, judging by the salty tang to his scent.

Will turns to the Inspector.

‘He’s going to kill you, you know.’ When Pazzi doesn’t respond, Will shrugs. ‘I’m usually right about these things.’

‘He let you know him.’ Renaldo’s lip thin in distaste at the mere idea of someone mating with, bonding to, The Monster of Florence. ‘He sent you his heart. Where has he gone now?’

Gone?

Will smiles, his eyes flat and dead as a hunting shark’s.

‘He hasn’t *gone* anywhere.’ He looks back towards the catacombs, and the locked door keeping him from his mate. ‘He’s still here.’

***

The catacombs beneath the chapel are flooded with bloody water. Darkness submerges the corridor and Will moves through the gloom like a diver exploring a sunken submarine, passing submerged corpses and guttering candles.

He floats in the gloom, holding his breath. His chest is tight, straining with air, the pressure rising until he can’t take it anymore.

He closes his eyes, squeezing them tightly shut until a kaleidoscope of colors explodes across the lids and then –

He’s alright. He’s underneath the chapel, amidst mummified corpses and pumice stone, over two thousand years old.

Will listens, carefully monitoring his breath. He sees the walkway before him, weaving through the corpses, leading down into a darkened maze. Candles flicker in carved alcoves, infrequent and weak, barely able to hold back the shadows choking them. Will stays close to the walls, following the well-worn path deeper into the chapel’s crypts and catacombs.

In the distance ahead, he can hear unhurried footsteps, and the same scent is thick in the undisturbed air.

‘Hannibal.’

The footsteps stop as Will’s shout echoes along the passageways. He listens, straining to hear anything over the sound of his own breathing, but there’s nothing. No reply, only silence. After a moment, the footsteps resume their steady march.

Fucking Alphas.

Will breaks into a run, heedless of the darkness blinding him. Behind him, his gun raised and safety off, is Renaldo Pazzi, pupils blown wide as he struggles to see in the gloom.

They race each other, two sets of golden eyes glowing in the blackness. Will darts left, then right, right again, pausing at another junction in the subterranean maze.

The room widens, supported by a series of pillars, each one adorned with mummified corpses wrapped in decaying robes, surrounded by passages branching off into different directions.

The clatter of footsteps changes and Will swings around, wild-eyed and breathing hard as he searches for the source of the sound. The shape of the gallery makes it sound like it's coming from everywhere… It's in front of him and behind him…

Arriving in the pillar room, Renaldo keeps his gun up, allowing it to lead him into the dim light of the gallery.

'Signor Graham?'

A sound behind him makes him spin with a gasp, but years of training keeps him from firing without intention. Will Graham stands right where he had just been, calm and quiet, seemingly utterly at peace in the shadows.

'You shouldn't be down here alone,' the young Omega says, and Renaldo feels the first flicker of fear since entering the crypt.

'I'm not alone,' he says warily. 'I'm with you.'

Will smiles, his golden eyes downcast and face half in darkness.

'You don't know whose *side* I'm on.'

Renaldo sighs through his nose, watching Will cautiously.

'What are you going to do when you find him?' he asks. 'Your *Il Mostro?'*

Your mate. Your Alpha.

'I'm…' Will looks over his shoulder, scenting the air and purring softly at the taste lingering like sugar on his tongue. 'I'm *curious* about that myself.'

Renaldo slides his gun back into the holster in his belt.

'You and I carry the dead with us, Signor Graham,' he murmurs. 'We both need to unburden.'

Will's resulting smile is as cold and dangerous as his eyes.

'Why don't you carry your dead back to the chapel?' he suggests. 'Before you count yourself among them?'

Renaldo sighs again, despair eating away his remaining strength.

There's no argue with a madman.

'You are already dead, aren't you?' He shakes his head. It's such a waste. Such a loss.

Will's eyes glow like suns at the end of time, the moment before the universe collapses in on itself. Withdrawing, he drifts back into the darkness.

'Buonanotte, commendatore,' he purrs, swallowed by shadows until nothing shows but the gleam of his teeth.

Obscured behind the stone, Hannibal waits, still and silent as a spider. He holds his breath, his body taut as a bowstring, watching and listening as Inspector Renaldo Pazzi takes one last look after Will.

This way… Just a little closer.

But Renaldo Pazzi doesn't approach him. Perhaps sensing the danger he is in, the danger that *Will* presents to him, he turns and retreats back to the safety of the chapel above.

That leaves them, he and Will, alone together in the darkness.

Resuming the hunt, Will treads ever deeper into the maze. Unseen, Hannibal tracks him step for step, curious as to what he will do if he finds him. Will could divert from his path at any moment; they could cross paths at any second.

Do you want to? Are you ready?

The sound of water gets louder. Will growls, getting frustrated at the endless fucking twists and turns, desperate to just see his Alpha again. Hold him. Smell him.

'Hannibal…'

The catacombs flood, water sloshing around his ankles. Will comes to a stop in another room filled with pillars and skulls, resigning himself to the fact that his Alpha, his mate, his *everything*, won't show himself.

You broke my mind apart… Because you loved me. You tried to save me, the only way you knew how. Through pain and violence and deceit.

I still love you.

Lifting his golden eyes to the ceiling, he emits a single, echoing purr, and then, before the sound can fade, whispers,

'I forgive you.'

Secondo

Chapter Summary

In his quest to understand more about his former Alpha, Will travels to Hannibal's childhood home in Lithuania, where he discovers a decades-old secret and meets Hannibal's first unbonded Omega; Chiyoh.

Jack Crawford arrives in Italy.

Chapter Notes

Hey peeps, sorry this chapter is as long as some of the others. I'm sure the wordcount will pick up again once Hannibal and Will are together! I'm so eager for them to reunite!!!

THREE

Secondo

The glug of Chianti into a crystal goblet breaks the silence pooling between them, and Bedelia Du Maurier stares down at the burgundy liquid waiting to soothe her nerves.

'How was Palermo?' she asks, almost scared of the answer she's sure to receive. Hannibal is unusually pensive; sitting in an armchair before the ever-present fire, staring at a distant window with his dark eyes thickly ringed in crimson and scent roiling with arousal, anger and grief.

'Will was there,' he replies, and Bedelia can't help but glance up in surprise. No wonder her fellow Alpha is so rattled. Try as Hannibal might to hide it, Will Graham always has an unsettling effect on him.

'You're ruminating the way most of us look for a lost object,' she comments. 'We review its image in our minds and compare that image to what we see.'

Hannibal is reminded of his last supper with Will; their thinly veiled discussion of transformation and the ideality of a loved one.

An imago is an image of a loved one, buried in the unconscious, carried with us all our lives.

‘Or don’t see,’ he muses, and Bedelia takes a calming sip of wine.

‘Was it nice to see him?’ she asks, uncertain of the answer she will receive. How, after all, is Hannibal feeling – a man with a flawed sense of emotion – after seeing the Omega to whom he bonded, created a child with… The Omega he then Cut, certainly destroying all chance of a successful pregnancy.

It would have been kinder to kill him.

‘It was nice,’ Hannibal murmurs, his knuckles turning white as he clenches his fist near his chin. Very deliberately, he lowers his hand to his thigh and smooths out a crease in the fabric of his trousers, irritated by the spark of his gold wedding ring. ‘Among other things.’

It was nice. It was painful. It was cathartic but now I want more. I want him back, but I don’t know if I can ever trust him again. If I can ever love him again. And he I.

‘He knew where to look for me,’ he comments, and Bedelia narrows her eyes, curious as to the bond seemingly still connecting the two men.

‘You knew where he would look for you,’ she says, remembering Hannibal’s fevered, almost desperate need to take Anthony Dimmond’s body to Palermo.

Hannibal’s eyes flicker crimson, shining with unshed tears.

‘He said he forgave me,’ he whispers, his voice catching on the enormity of it. Will, with his boundless love and endless empathy… His sympathy and understanding… How could he ever have hoped to be worthy of such a man?

I killed our family, our children, but he knows why and he found the strength within himself to forgive me… In a way I couldn’t forgive him.

‘Forgiveness is too great and difficult for one person,’ Bedelia says, watching the turmoil on Hannibal’s face. ‘It requires two. The betrayer, and the betrayed.’ As she speaks, she leans her weight against the armrest of the second chair, looking down at the grieving Alpha with the wary concern his violence demands. ‘Which one are you?’

Will betrayed me, made me believe he loved me as I truly am… But the things I did to him… My motivations may have been kind but my methods…

Hannibal’s chest spasms with a sharp, uncomfortable realization. He hates that his darkness has hurt Will. He wants to be a better person for him, but he doesn’t know how and the helplessness, the feeling of being trapped, is suffocating.

‘I’m vague on those details,’ he says, forcing his voice to remain calm, his expression detached, even as his mind reels and his pulse races.

Bedelia watches as the man, the psychopath, before her, experiences his first true sense of regret, and when she speaks again, she pitches her voice low and soft.

‘Betrayal and forgiveness are… best seen as something akin to falling in love.’

She takes another sip of wine, watching as Hannibal digests this new information.

Falling in love… Is that what this is? Do I love Will Graham? I thought I did… but what is this feeling now?

'You cannot control, with respect, to whom you fall in love,' he murmurs, eyes downcast and fingers fiddling with the wedding ring.

I wish Will was the other person wearing it.

Bedelia watches, fascinated by the effect one Omega has had on such a previously steadfast Alpha, before she says,

'You are going to be caught. It has already been set into motion.'

Hannibal glances at her, sharp and cold.

'Is that concern for your patient, or concern for yourself?'

Bedelia smiles; a cool, dismissive twist of her lips.

'I am not concerned about me,' she says. 'I know *exactly* how I will navigate my way out of… whatever it is I have gotten myself into.' She pauses, narrowing her eyes when Hannibal smiles at her fortitude, and then asks, 'Do you?'

Resuming his examination of the dancing flames in the hearth, Hannibal considers his plan, his escape money and his house in Argentina.

'I did.'

He won't leave until Will has found him. Until he is reunited with his Omega. One last time.

Bedelia sighs, bemused by the strange relationship between the two men. It's like nothing she's ever seen before, and she's grateful her own sanity isn't mingled with their twisted affections.

'Where will Will Graham be looking for you next?' she asks, drinking more wine to silence her racing thoughts.

Hannibal's heart skips a beat and he smells pine needles, black mud and moss when he next takes a breath.

'Someplace I can never go…'

Home.

***

The foyer of Hannibal's Memory Palace is the Normal Chapel in Palermo, but that is not where construction began. The door to the Memory Palace itself is in the darkness at the

center of his mind, and has a latch that can be found by touch alone.

To find the center of this maze, and the heart of his former Alpha, Will needs to travel backwards, through time and space to a point before the Chesapeake Ripper or *Il Mostro*; before the Parisian boarding school and the orphanage.

He needs to see the catalyst. There's so much blood between then and now. A history seeped in pain, built on the suffering of others. He needs to know why.

Do you even know how much damage you've done?

The darkness is hot, and Will's boots splash through a crimson river. The current is there, ever-present, always tugging at the frayed edges of his mind, constantly seeking a loose thread to pull at until his sanity unravels once again. Whispers taunt him, encouraging him to follow them into the darkness, to lose himself as a sailor might sink his ship on a siren's rock, but he can fight it. He can stay whole and tethered, certain in his pursuit of knowledge.

I won't find what I'm looking for in my mind. I have to stay grounded.

His shadow turns, eyes gleaming, and then winds its way upwards, entering the world.

We're here.

Will cuts the engine of his rented car, soaking up the silence of the Lithuanian countryside. It's a cold, dismal day. Gunmetal clouds hang low, threatening rain and, in the distance, thunder rolls. Crows caw, reminding him of the field kabuki and Cassie Boyle's body, but Minnesota is thousands of miles away and there's a lifetime between then and now.

A pair of wrought-iron gates bar his path, chained and padlocked from the inside, snaking with vines and ivy, the stones green with moss.

The scent of pine-needles and black mud fills his nostrils when Will steps out, and his boots splash into a puddle from the recent downpour.

He collects his satchel and approaches the gates. The iron crest on each gate is rusted, etched with lichen and crusted with filth, but he can see read the carved words encircled with stags, swans and a snake.

Lecter Dhvaras.

The Manor was built by Hannibal the Grim in 1410, using captured soldiers for labor. On the first day his pennant flew from the completed towers, Hannibal's ancestor had assembled the prisoners in the kitchen garden and released them to go home, just as he had promised. According to the public records, which Will had managed to track down during his final weeks of recuperation at Stonebarrow, many of the freed men had elected to stay in Hannibal's service, owing to the quality of the provender.

Now, the imposing manor house lies in ruin; a crumbling echo of its former glory. Staring between the bars of the gates, Will studies the empty grounds stretching ahead of him; the unkempt driveway and wild brambles overgrowing the lawns. The woods seem to lean in;

threatening both the manor and Will. It reminds of the fairytale he'd read to the twins, the last night before leaving them.

The brave knight approached the dragon's lair, his sword at the ready, knowing the sleeping princess was inside, waiting to be rescued.

He needs to know. He needs to understand, no matter how painful it is.

Reaching down, he gives the chain a sharp tug, hoping it's just as rusted and weak as the gates. But the padlock is new; gleaming steel and too strong for him to break. Will huffs to himself, stepping back and studying the walls to either side of the gates. There's a tree stump nearby and a missing spike above; the perfect space for him to scale and get up and over.

Once inside, he keeps to the tree line, ducking and dodging branches and cobwebs, making his way towards a small hunting cottage sitting in the manor's shadow, dwarfed by the imposing walls.

Raindrops begin to fall, fat and heavy on his face. Will peers in through one of the murky windows, studying the rustic, shadowed interior, and then tries the door.

Bolted.

Walking away, he circles the lake to the east of the cottage, watched closely by a pair of black swans gliding across the dark surface of the water.

Hannibal used to feed the swans bread when he was a child. He used willow branches to augment his wingspan and intimidate the male every time it challenged him.

Will pulls a granola bar from his satchel. Crumbling it between his soft leather gloves, he tosses the offering out to the birds, smiling as they swim forwards to retrieve the food.

For the child lost.

A narrow footpath leads him to the family cemetery. The railings are collapsing, slowly engulfed by ivy, and the grass has been left to grow wild, swallowing the small headstones from centuries past.

Only one tombstone remains clear. Freshly tended, carefully weeded and free of the ever-present lichen and moss. Fresh-cut flowers sit in the offering vase, bright against the drab, dull day, and Will's heart skips a beat when he reads the carved name on the stone, confirming his suspicions.

Mischa Lecter. Mylima.

'Beloved,' he whispers, remembering Hannibal calling him something similar.

Loved. Special. Honored.

Betrayed.

It’s time to go back.

***

Will settles himself in a clearing, with a good eyeline of both the manor house and the cottage. Using binoculars, he keeps himself at a safe distance, and settles down into the soft comfort of Hannibal’s black leather therapy chair.

The current warms him, whispering over his arms, through his chest and up into his skull, slithering like a caress through his hair.

Alpha…

‘It’s not healing to see your childhood home,’ Hannibal says. ‘But it helps you measure whether you are broken. How and why; assuming you want to know.’

They are sitting across from each other; Hannibal in his plaid suit and blue shirt, Will in his jeans, navy overcoat and cotton shirt. Their chairs are further apart; more like their first session together, and Will feels the distance between them like a knife.

‘I want to know,’ he replies, lips thinning as he considers the monster hidden inside the man before him. Then, after a moment, he nods towards the manor. ‘Is this where construction began?’

Hannibal looks with him, seemingly undisturbed but his hands gripping each other in his lap more tightly than before.

‘On my Memory Palace?’ He smiles at Will, his eyes sparkling. ‘Its door at the center of my mind… And here you are, feeling for the latch.’

Will frowns, considering the hallucination of his lover, his partner, his mate.

Former mate.

‘The spaces in your mind devoted to your earliest years,’ he asks, searching for the right words. ‘… are they different than the other rooms?’

The scene changes; the woods are replaced by tall windows, flanked by red and grey curtains. The carpet of leaves becomes hardwood flooring and the view of the manor becomes the fireplace and Hannibal’s desk. When Will speaks again, his voice echoes.

‘Are they different than this room?’

‘This room holds sound and motion,’ Hannibal replies, considering the office around him. ‘Great snakes, wrestling and heaving in the dark. Other rooms are static scenes; fragmentary. Like painted shards of glass.’

As he speaks, Will imagines him, barely held together, great spaces of blank plaster between his formative years.

‘Everything keyed to memories,’ the Omega says, his own perception distorted by the fractures, his own mind as cracked and misaligned. ‘Leading to other memories.’

‘In geometric progression.’ Hannibal smiles; pleased to share his success with the other man.

Will wets his lips, his shadow scenting the air for weakness.

‘The rooms you can’t bring yourself to go… Nothing escapes from them that causes you any comfort.’

‘Screams fill some of those places,’ Hannibal agrees, working to keep his voice neutral. ‘But the corridors do not echo screaming… because I hear music.’

The room shivers. Shatters. The shards splinter through Will’s brain, wrenching him back to reality with a throbbing headache.

That was a gunshot.

Another two shots are fired in quick succession, and Will grabs his bag from the ground. He runs towards the sound, eager to know who is hunting on Hannibal’s land, hoping it isn’t poachers or stray Alphas seeking unoccupied territory.

As he approaches another clearing, Will slows, dropping to a crouch behind a fallen tree and peering out from between the twisted bark.

A young woman appears from the tree-line. Steely-eyed, dressed in dark clothes and carrying a large rifle. She is Japanese; her glossy black hair pulled back into a tight, functional bun, her dark eyes flashing gold as she pauses on the other side of the clearing.

Omega.

Will gets his binoculars up and brings the approaching woman into focus. She’s looking towards his location but not directly at him. What is she doing?

The Omega brings the rifle up, taking aim, and then a pair of pheasants explode from the bushes to the left. The woman turns, expertly following their panicked flight, and two shots ring out as she clips them both.

The birds fall, ungainly in death, and land with dull thumps on the earth.

Will watches, his heart pounding, as the other Omega takes aim at his location again.

How can she know I’m here?

Withdrawing into the shadow of the woods, Will holds his breath and waits. Silence greets him, encloses him. He is a spectral presence, unmoving and unheard.

Nothing’s wrong… There’s nothing wrong here.

The other Omega lowers the rifle, unable to see anything through the scope. She waits, searching the woods for whatever is off in this place she knows so well…

Sighing, she moves on and collects her game, leaving Will to stare after her, his shadow dancing in his eyes.

Who are you?

***

Beautiful, colorful barbs fan out from the rachis, fanning out into multiple feathers, which fan out into a wing. Slender fingers intertwine with the feathers, pulling. The pheasant's skin peaks, pulled by the quill, and then retracts as it separates.

Fine, fuzzy down floats within beams of faint light, bobbing in the air current, drifting to lie amidst a dozen other feathers already gathering dust on the floor. The young Omega works diligently, breaking down the birds, surrounded by other pheasants hanging to cure, strings of garlic and bunches of rosemary.

Will lowers his binoculars, his irises glowing like molten gold as he watches the young woman at work. She has a quiet, sophisticated air to her, her movements certain and precise. He watches again as, with a cleaver, she removes a still-feathered wing from the pheasant's body with a succinct chop. There's a second chop and the other wing falls to the floor, spattering blood on the stone.

Hannibal taught her to chop like that. He severs limbs in the same way.

Will can see him; his Alpha, navy shirt sleeves rolled up, a glass of Chardonnay gleaming beside him. Several days ago, Hannibal had removed the hand from a forearm, sliced the top layer of the skin off the muscle and rubbed it with salt, seasoned it with herbs and then hung it over a heater to cure.

As the flesh had darkened and dried, the fatty layer had turned white, just like Parma harm, and Will knows that Hannibal has spent the grater part of the afternoon slicing the meat into feathers. The Alpha has then layered them to form what looks like an angel wing, garnishing the platter with bunches of grapes, leaves and his ever-present pomegranates, which add a splash of lurid red to the dish. could then be sliced into feathers and shaped to form a wing.

Will carries the dish through to the dining room, setting it down at the end of the table opposite Hannibal, who is using an ice pick to smash, with brutal decision, a slick, clear block of ice into chips.

Professor Sogliato, relaxing as their guest of the honor, reaches for a feather of meat, peeling it off the bone and eating it with a stuffed olive from the bowl beside him.

'Such a *pity* that Signore and Signora Albizzi could not be here tonight,' he says, his voice dripping with cold sarcasm. The lie, and all its rudeness, is evident in what he does not say. 'I do hope you don't feel… *snubbed* by their rejection of your invitation.'

‘The *Studiolo* is a small, fierce group,’ Hannibal replies, allowing the smaller Alpha to believe he has been beaten. ‘They’ve ruined a number of academic reputations.’

‘Appearing before them is a peril,’ Sogliato agrees, inspecting another sliver of meat before eating it with relish.

‘You were *very* eager to see me discredited, Professor Sogliato,’ Hannibal says, scooping the ice into three cocktail glasses. When he glances up at his guest, the Italian Alpha chuckles at the accusation.

‘You sang for your supper before the dragons at the *Studiolo,’* Sogliato concedes, though his eyes remain steely black and cold. He disapproves, still.

‘And you sang very well,’ Will murmurs, as Hannibal now pours a mixture of champagne, white wine, rum, syrup and orange juice onto the ice in the glasses.

Professor Sogliato claps sarcastically.

‘Yes. First applause, and then by wet-eyed acclamation.’ He scoffs. ‘The membership’s affirmed you as *master* of the Palazzo Capponi.’

Adding bitter orange curls to the top of the cocktail, Hannibal announces the drink.

‘Punch Romaine.’ He gives the first glass to Will, who smiles up at him in thanks, admiring the beautiful drink. ‘A cocktail created by Escoffier. Served to first-class guests on the Titanic during their last dinner.’

What are you up to, Hannibal?

Will watches as his mate gives the second glass to Professor Sogliato, his belly twitching with excitement as Hannibal moves behind the smaller Alpha.

Sogliato takes a sip, humming his pleasure at the refreshing taste. He offers Will a greasy, lying smile, and holds up his glass in a toast.

‘The committees have a new curator,’ he says. ‘They do not miss the old one.’

Will holds his glass up to mirror the toast, and they both drink. Hannibal helps himself to feathered meat from the platter, refusing to allow the matter to rest so easily. Sogliato, after all, is a threat.

‘If my victory pleased the *professore*, I could not tell,’ he says, and Sogliato sets the glass down on its silver saucer with a sigh.

‘Then you weren’t paying attention,’ he replies, somewhat waspishly. Hannibal, moving behind him once again with a small plate of meat, olives and bread, glances at Will as he says, quietly,

‘I pay lots of attention.’ He sets the plate down at his place at the head of the table and reaches for the icepick. ‘But not in a wide-eyed, indiscriminate way.’

With deadly speed and accuracy, he stabs Professor Sogliato through the temple, perforating his frontal cortex. The smaller Alpha chokes, unable to process what has just happened to him. He freezes, his hands twitching and bladder releasing itself to trickle down the chair leg.

Will stares, shocked by the sudden change of events, and Hannibal seats himself with a sigh.

‘That may have been impulsive,’ he admits, tilting his head to his Omega in apology.

Will sips the cocktail, ice clinking against his teeth as he fights back a growl at his Alpha’s recklessness.

‘Been mulling that impulse ever since you decided to serve Punch Romaine?’ he replies, knowing full well that the nod to the Titanic’s last cocktail was a nod to Sogliato’s similarly dire situation.

Ever since Professor Sogliato snubbed you before the committee at that party, his days have been numbered. How convenient that the Albizzis believe their dinner is tomorrow.

The Italian Alpha continues to stutter and gasp at them. His eyes flood red, the irises shimmering around fixed, dilated pupils.

‘I…’ Sogliato smiles, unable to comprehend his new reality. ‘I can’t see.’ He giggles and then splutters, brow creasing into a perplexed frown. ‘Mi ricordo che il curatore…’

He giggles again and then chokes. His body is beginning to die but it will take time. It’s cruelty for cruelty’s sake, and Will has had enough.

Grabbing his napkin, he rises from his seat opposite the suffering man and, grasping the handle of the icepick firmly, yanks it out.

Professor Sogliato chokes one last time and a great spurt of blood and clear fluid leaves his skull. A moment later, he collapses, face-first, into his plate of food.

Hannibal, busy eating, grins up at his partner.

‘Technically,’ he says, ‘*you* killed him.’

As the Italian’s blood seeps across the silver plate of olives, drowning the antipasti and spilling out across the crisp white linen of the tablecloth, Will turns to his mate. He’s no longer wearing the smart burgundy suit imagined by his former Alpha, but the navy overcoat and jeans of his actual outfit.

‘No longer interested in preserving the peace you’ve found here?’ he asks, coolly disapproving.

Hannibal merely shrugs and adds another sliver of human flesh to his mouthful.

‘You cannot preserve entropy,’ he replies. ‘It gradually descends into disorder.’

‘Two men from the *Capponi* are dead,’ Will says, and he can hear Bedelia Du Maurier’s voice even as, through Hannibal’s eyes, he sees himself speaking the words.

This is your fantasy. You want me to be there with you, instead of her. My absence is a physical pain in your chest.

Hannibal takes a long, sumptuous sip of his cocktail.

‘I can only claim one. Technically.’

Will looks down at the arrogant, disinterested Alpha. The sharp exterior, the confidence he portrays… It is an act. A front designed to cause chaos and inspire fear.

‘You’re drawing us to you,’ he murmurs, cautiously optimistic. ‘Aren’t you? All of us.’

Me. Alana. Jack.

It’s all starting to come together. But who will reach him first?

***

Special Agent Jack Crawford removes his fedora as he enters the Norman Chapel in Palermo, Italy. The church is beautiful, but it may as well be a mausoleum for the way it now feels.

Hannibal Lecter has corrupted this place. He murdered an Omega and displayed his mutilated corpse here, before the altar. That can never be undone.

The photographs of the crime scene are shocking. The skill with which the broken body has been twisted and re-formed into a heart is impressive but sickening.

Inspector Renaldo Pazzi, respectful of the more experienced Alpha from the FBI, comes to sit quietly beside him, having given Jack twenty minutes to absorb the crime details in silence.

‘As with his crimes in Florence,’ Pazzi says, ‘*Il Mostro* collected anatomical trophies, but left no evidence.’

‘Dr Lecter *is* careful,’ Jack agrees, the scar on his throat itching at the memory of their fight, so many months ago. ‘He *will* strike,’ he warns, ‘but his needs don’t force him to strike often.’

‘There were long periods when *Il Mostro* didn’t strike at all,’ Inspector Pazzi confirms. ‘This is the first in twenty years.’

Jack glances at him, sensing something more than the Omega’s words bely.

‘You have new evidence.’

Inspector Pazzi nods, his eyes glowing with the rich, deep gold of an Omega long-bonded.

‘You know,’ he muses, ‘the window of the Questura laboratory is garlanded with garlic. To keep out the evil spirits.’

Jack shakes his head, scoffing a laugh at such superstitious nonsense, and Renaldo Pazzi nods his agreement at the childish fears.

‘These are not people open to new ideas,’ he admits. ‘It took them four hundred years to allow Omegas to join the *polizia*. My city mocks me. My hunt for *Il Mostro* has let the crows peck at my heart.’ When Jack nods his understanding, the Omega smiles sadly, sensing his pain. ‘How is *your* heart?’

Jack considers the question, and all that he’s been through.

‘Well pecked,’ he admits. He rubs at the greying beard on his cheeks. ‘If he hasn’t already, *Il Mostro* will return to Florence.’

Renaldo Pazzi straightens, his eyes gleaming in the low light.

‘Come back with me,’ he urges. ‘We have a chance to regain our reputation, and enjoy the honors of our trade by capturing the Monster.’

Jack considers it, but then he sighs and shakes his head. He can’t. As much as he might want to, that’s not the promise he made.

‘I’m not here for the Monster,’ he says, and he thinks of Bill Graham’s voice; hoarse with worry after he’d learned of his son’s disappearance.

Bring him back safe. Please. Bring my boy home.

Jack had made a promise, and he would do everything in his power to honor it.

‘*Non è la mia case,*’ Jack murmurs. ‘Not my house; not my fire. I’m here for Will Graham.’

‘Are you… his Alpha?’ Inspector Pazzi asks, confused as he’d suspected that Mr Graham was mated to *Il Mostro*. Or, at the very least, Courted by him.

‘No.’ Jack sighs, thinking of everything they’ve been through over the years. ‘But I am responsible for him. I’m the closest thing to an Alphan guardian he has left.’ He stands up, hat in hand. ‘Besides,’ he adds, ‘I gave my word to his father. And Betas hold grudges.’

***

Shadows reach high, dancing away from the light of a low fire burning amidst dripping woods. Hunching as close to it as he can, Will rubs his hands together and huddles inside his coat, shivering with cold.

The pop and crack of burning twigs only serves to emphasize how silent the woods are, and how alone he is. But Will doesn’t feel alone. The back of his neck prickles with unseen eyes, and, separate to the sound of the fire, there is the snap of a twig breaking under pressure.

Someone's out there. Someone… or something.

Pulling a flashlight from his pocket, Will shines a light on the Stygian darkness. Skeletal branches and pale trunks stare back at him, sinister in the gloom. Brambles crisscross the spaces, giving the appearance of antlers.

The wendigo.

Kicking dirt over the fire, Will sets off in search of his monster, tramping over mulch and parting branches to make room. All he can hear is his breathing, rushing in and out of his lungs, a roar above the thump of his pulse.

And then a branch breaks again, deafening in the silence. Will jumps, spinning around, sweat beading on his forehead as he strains to see beyond the narrow strip of light.

Is there someone else here, besides him and his demon?

His path takes him deeper into the trees. Will has just lowered his torch when he sees a blinking glow, there and then gone. There's a pause and then another, and another, drifting upward and then disappearing.

Will moves toward the direction of the light, curious.

It's a firefly imago. The insect closest to him sheds its cocoon, spreads its new wings and takes to the night air, glowing.

Following the insects, Will steps from the trees near the forest's edge. Moonlight penetrates the trees, filtering down enough silvery light for him to see that he's standing in a clearing, once carefully tended, with low walls and steps; now overcome with moss and vines.

It's a secret garden.

Beautiful; like a dream or a fairytale, the garden is magically lit by a swarm of fireflies. They rise in a tight spiral from the ground, like a loose tornado of orange motes, and Will kneels beneath him, bending one leg to study the pale-shelled snails oozing their way across the basin of a bronze angel statue.

A cochlear garden. The shelled gastropods leave glistening trails of slime as they move carefully across the red-painted outline of a child's hand, and Will's chest tightens as he traces the decades-old mark with his leather-gloved fingers.

Mischa liked to play here. In Mother's garden.

Rising to his feet, he backs away, leaving the space once more undisturbed. Another tomb for the remembered dead.

He'll find no answers here.

***

A match-head rasps along the rough edge of the box, striking a flame that quickly burns yellow. An oil lamp soon takes the fire, glowing softly and gently illuminating the face of the young Japanese Omega carrying it.

The pheasant, plucked and chopped to size, has been roasting in the oven for a couple of hours. Now, skin golden and fat sizzling, it is pulled from the stove to rest on the chopping board.

A fresh cleaver swings down, chopping the bird in half. Will watches, hidden behind trees, as the younger Omega wraps a portion in parchment and then pockets it, leaving her hands free to hold the lantern and rifle.

She leaves the cottage, tramping through the darkness with the ease of familiarity towards the manor house.

Silent as a specter, Will flits from shadow to shadow in pursuit of her. A rusted window latch gives access to the house, and he watches from behind a vine-choked staircase as the lantern light bobs with each of the Omega's light footsteps, disappearing down into the bowels of the house.

Once the lantern has disappeared from view, Will clicks on his flashlight and descends the stairs, grimacing at the occasional crunch of a snail crushed beneath his boot, unsure if the sound of water trickling down walls is real or only in his mind.

It might be real. The room he's breached is dank and cavernous, with large glass vats and wine presses. Bottled wine lies in neat rows, each rank holding a dozen or so containers. The ceiling drips from the recent rain and more water flows beyond a large sewer drain. The snails have crisscrossed the walls and floor; their glistening trails sprawl like runes and mystic incantations over the stone surfaces, reflecting in the narrow beam of Will's torch.

Another crunch, but not shell this time. Will bends, frowning, and his gloved fingers close around a narrow bone.

Human? Or something else?

'Kas ten? Labas?'

A hoarse, rasping voice; an Alpha long past his prime. A man who has forgotten how to form words from years of silence. Will's crest prickles and his heart forgets to beat as he swings the flashlight towards an iron gate.

Not a gate. The door of a prison cell.

Will lifts the light, illuminating the dank, straw-covered floor. There are more bones inside, and dead rats. The bars are decorated with handmade trinkets and dolls made of bird bones, snail shells and twine. Feces overflows from the bucket in the corner and the Alpha himself is smeared with it.

His eyes are feral red, his fangs overly long inside such a gaunt, haggard face. His hair is matted filth, his genitals covered by a soiled loincloth and fingernails curving into claws.

He's been here for years. Alone. In the dark. Slowly going mad.

'*Atsiliepk, kalbek prasau, prasau, prasau*,' the Alpha begs, pressing his ghoulish face to the bars. Tears trickle down his face, cutting stripes in the dirt on his skin. *'Ji su manimi nekalba. Ji niekada su manimi nekalba! Prasau!'*

Will narrows his eyes, lost as to what the man is saying. He recognizes the language – Lithuanian – but they are no words Hannibal has ever spoken to him, so he doesn't know them.

A block of ice shivers down his spine at the tell-tale click of a gun being cocked. Careful to move slowly, raising his hands in surrender, Will turns to face the Japanese Omega he had been stalking.

The young woman frowns at him, her eyes blazing gold down the length of the rifle.

'You're upsetting him.'

At the sound of the Omega's voice, the caged Alpha cowers away. He retreats into a corner, hugging his knees to his chest, rocking and muttering his pleas.

Ignoring her prisoner, the Japanese woman frowns at Will.

'You're trespassing,' she warns, her gloved hands steady on the trigger of the gun. Will has no doubt that she will shoot him if she thinks she needs to.

'I'm… a friend of Hannibal's,' he replies, his voice echoing in the chamber, deeper and richer than his female counterpart.

The other Omega pauses, though her aim never falters.

'He sent you?'

'My name is Will Graham,' Will replies, wondering if she knows who he was – who he *is* – to the Alpha within whose ancestral home she lives. 'I'm unarmed… May I lower my arms?'

Without waiting, Will begins to lower them, and the other Omega indicates with the shotgun barrel to keep them where they are.

'This trigger has a three-pound pull,' she replies. 'I'm holding two of it.'

Will lifts his arms back to where they were, ignoring the ache in his shoulders. The itching vulnerability of having his chest and midriff exposed to a bullet.

Behind him, the Alpha raises his voice to beg again.

'Atsiliepk, kalbek prasau.'

‘What’s he saying?’ Will asks, irritated that he doesn’t understand.

‘He wants you to look at him,’ the other Omega says. ‘Speak to him.’ When Will starts to turn his head to oblige, she growls. ‘But you are *not* going to!’

Will gives her a scathing look, his own irises flooding with a warmer, darker gold.

‘I see you’ve er, *cast aside* the social graces normally afforded to human beings.’

‘*He’s* cast them aside,’ the Omega replies. ‘All he’s allowed is the sound of water.’ She approaches from the side, still holding Will in her line of sight. ‘It’s what the unborn hear. It’s their last memory of peace.’

Will quivers as black rage courses through him. The injustice of it rankles, yes, but he knows all too well how it feels to be locked in a cage, trapped in the dark with nothing but the screams in his head to comfort him.

‘You’re keeping him like an animal,’ he spits, and the younger Omega smirks at his outrage.

‘I wouldn’t do *this* to an *animal*.’

She jerks the rifle to the left, motioning for him to move. To leave the room. Will nods, resigned to being escorted from the premises with no further answers about his former mate, and begins to walk, his hands still held up to either side of his head.

The female Omega escorts him out, keeping a safe distance behind him as she drives him from the house.

Descending the steps of the manor, Will risks a question to halt his impending eviction from the estate. If he can get the other Omega talking, he might be able to stay.

He needs to. He needs to know more about the man in the cage and the statue in the garden.

‘What did he do?’ he asks, careful not to slip on the wet stone. The answer, when it comes, pulls him up short.

‘He ate her.’

‘Mischa?’ He slows, unable to walk and process the gravity of the discovery. The other Omega comes closer, her gun still trained onto his back, but Will ignores the threat. ‘How long has he been your prisoner?’

‘We have been each other’s prisoner… for a very long time.’

Of course you have.

Scoffing softly, Will begins to turn towards her.

‘However did you find yourself in this… *situation?’* he asks, already knowing the answer. They both do, after all. They’re both Omegas enthralled by the same Alpha.

Sensing his thought, the other Omega comes to stand abreast of him.

‘That question applies to both of us.’

Will chuckles mirthlessly, his eyes blurred with tears. He’d really wanted to be special, but it seems he was just a new toy.

How many Omegas has he bonded and then Cut? Does he feel anything at all?

‘And the answer’s probably the same,’ he replies, his voice wobbling. He needs a distraction. ‘What’s your name?’

The other Omega narrows her eyes, considering whether or not to answer. Then,

‘Chiyoh.’ She lets the rifle butt lower a fraction. ‘How do you know Hannibal?’

How do I know Hannibal? Will almost laughs again at the question. The naivety of it.

‘One could argue… *intimately*.’ He takes a shaky breath. ‘I’m… I *was* his Omega. His mate.’ His mouth twists in pain. ‘We… He…’ His hand twitches, wanting to touch the scar on the back of his neck where his crest should be. ‘He C-Cut me. Left me.’

‘*Nakama*?’ Chiyoh murmurs. At the puzzled look on Will’s face, she explains, ‘It’s a Japanese word for “bonded closer than family”.’

‘Yes, we were Pair Bonded,’ Will confirms. ‘We were *nakama*.’ He swallows the lump in his throat, forcing back tears. ‘Last time I saw him, he… er…’ His lips twist in a grimace. ‘He left me with a *smile*.’

As he lowers his hand, Chiyoh raises her gun as though expecting an attack. Will, however, simply lifts his shirt up, showing off the wide scar from Hannibal’s knife and the cesarean.

‘He sliced my crest off and he stabbed me in the gut,’ he says, quietly furious at the memory. ‘I was three months pregnant.’

Chiyoh stares, silently horrified, and then lowers the rifle. As she does, a tear trickles down her cheek.

‘All sorrows can be borne if you put them in a story,’ she says, her voice soft. ‘She steps closer, the lantern glowing between them, as bright as their eyes. ‘Tell me a story.’

***

‘In Roman times,’ Hannibal says, ‘each carcass was divided.’

As he speaks, he slides his butcher’s knife through the skinned body of Professor Sogliato, cutting away chuck, rib, round and shank.

‘Prime cuts went to nobility. Second to the clergy. Third to the bourgeoisie, and fourth to the army.’

Will sits beside him in their Florentine apartment, resplendent in a charcoal suit with a high black jumper; a perfect mirror to Hannibal's gray cashmere sweater and black blazer. Across from them, Signor and Signora Albizzi smile benignly; the president of the museum's governing board and his Omegan mate, blissfully unaware that they are about to dine upon their most recently lost associate.

'The *quinto quarto*,' Hannibal finishes, 'the offal, went to the poor.'

'The "fifth quarter"?' Will asks, frowning up at him, confused by the translation. Hannibal smiles genially, fingers busy shredding rosemary, stood over a hotplate set up so he can cook before his guests. Table-side theatrics.

'The innards of a carcass constitute roughly a quarter of its weight,' he explains, moving from herbs to artichokes.

'"*Il quinto quarto*" evolved from necessity to become high tradition,' Signor Albizzi says, speaking to Will as one might teach a child something new.

Will offers him a tight, irritated smile, even as his eyes flash gold. He is saved, however, by the hiss of lungs frying in an iron skillet, and Hannibal makes them whistle when he presses them with his spatula.

'"*Sibilo caratteristico*",' the Alpha purrs. 'When the lungs whistle, the dish is done.'

He slices the lungs at the table, and then layers the meat onto silver skewers. He arranges them to mimic a dozen crossed swords stabbing a shield, and sets the platter down before his guests with a flourish.

'*Coratella con Carciofi*. Purple artichokes served with spring lamb's liver, lungs and heart.'

Professor Sogliator's liver, lungs and heart.

Will – replacing Bedelia once more in Hannibal's story – is served a plate of oysters and roasted acorns, with a glass of sweet Marsala wine.

'Mmm.' Signora Albizzi purrs her appreciation, and then gestures to the fifth place setting beside her. 'Professor Sogliato doesn't know what he's missing,' she coos. She looks sadly at her fellow Omega, and adds, 'So rude of him to ignore your invitation.'

Will manages a tight-lipped smile.

'He sends his regrets.'

Signora Albizzi dips her head to the platter again and inhales deeply.

'Oh, Madonna, it smells *divine*.'

'It is,' Hannibal says, pouring them each a glass of Chianti from a carafe. 'I say that without ego.' He grins at them, his eyes sparkling with flirtatious humor as he adds, 'I don't require conventional reinforcement.'

The Albizzi's both laugh; obedient little lambs, and Will's stomach churns. He scoops out the flesh of an oyster, trying to ignore the way the smell of Professor Sogliato's innards makes his mouth water with hunger.

'You would agree, Signor Fell?' Signora Albizzi asks, seeking kinship with her fellow Omega.

'My husband's ego is not measured by *conventional* means,' Will agrees, shooting Hannibal a dirty look when his Alpha sits beside him and brushes his knee against his leg.

The Albizzi's, taking the reply to be flirtatious rather than insulting, smile genially, and Hannibal breaks the silence by adding,

'I first prepared this dish in honor of my sister, when I was very young.'

I ate her captors, her killers, in this very manner.

Will lifts a second oyster to his lips, watching with revulsion at the way Signor and Signora Albizzi's mouths close around their forks, unknowingly eating a former colleague.

'I'm sure you've perfected the recipe over the years,' he says quietly, an entirely different meaning layered beneath the innocuous words.

You've perfected killing over the years. You've elevated it to art.

Signora Albizzi savors the flavors coursing over her tongue; the tenderness of the meat and the subtle blend of herbs and spices.

'The meat,' she purrs, her pupils dilating with pleasure, irises molten gold and fork already gathering another mouthful before she's finished chewing.

Beside her, her Alpha chuckles.

'You have a very good butcher,' he says, heaping praise onto the man he believes to be Doctor Fell.

Hannibal smiles, accepting the compliment.

'I do indeed.' He leans forward. 'The lamb must be newly slaughtered; the organs cooked the same day. I *always* oversee this process personally.'

I watched as Professor Sogliato was slaughtered last night, and then I butchered him today, for this meal.

Will watches, disquieted, as the Albizzis continue to devour their fallen comrade. Hannibal's delight is palpable, and it is all he can do not to flip the table and scream as them to run, to leave now, while they still can.

It's too late for me, he thinks, watching the sheep across from him obey their social training and consume every last morsel of food. *Maybe I never stood a chance. I was dead the*

moment I looked into Hannibal's eyes.

It's an unnerving thought, made more so by the ease with which he accepts his fate. He doesn't want to die; he doesn't want Hannibal to kill him, but there's a good chance it will happen, and that's okay.

As long as he takes the Alpha with him.

***

The scene in Florence stays tucked, safe and sound, in the back of his mind as he describes his relationship with Hannibal; from being manipulated into a coma-inducing Heat to being gutted and Cut whilst carrying an unborn child.

Will is careful not to mention the babies' survival; Chiyoh, after all, is an unknown entity perhaps entirely loyal to Hannibal.

He watches her face as he speaks, and he sees his flat, dispassionate tone get under her skin, making her seek the comfort of the warmth of her teacup as she listens. Will allows his grief to be tangible; he misses Hannibal more than he'd thought possible. As angry as he is with him, being here, with the faint echo of his scent and his undeniable presence touching everything, all he wants to do is kiss him and be held by him.

'I know he misses me, too,' he says, his voice rough from unshed tears. 'He's still imagining me with him, just as I see him wherever I am.' He offers Chiyoh a tight, wobbling smile. 'We construct fairytales… and we accept them. Our minds concoct all sorts of fantasies when we don't want to believe something.'

I concocted the fantasy that Hannibal could change… that he would change for me. I twisted his motivations into love in my mind and that fairytale has taken root to this day. I didn't want to believe that he was just toying with me. I wanted to be special. Was any of it real?

Chiyoh's shoulder slump and grief darkens her eyes. She thinks Will is talking about her; about her honor towards the so-called treacherous Alpha who has tricked her into being a prisoner as much as the man in the cage.

'I *accept* what Hannibal has done,' she says, offering quiet protest to the naïve denial she's being accused of. 'I understand *why* he has done it.'

Will bares his teeth when he shakes his head.

'Mischa doesn't *explain* Hannibal. She doesn't *quantify* what he does.'

She doesn't excuse his actions. His mistakes.

'He does what was done to *her*,' Chiyoh says, softly earnest as she leans forwards across the low table.

Will rolls his eyes, and buys himself a moment by looking around the room of the hunting cottage. They're sitting opposite each other, kneeling before a squat table set for Japanese tea.

A fire burns in the hearth and the walls are enshrined with Edo art and artefacts.

‘How do you *know* it was your prisoner who killed Mischa?’ he asks, and, as Chiyoh lowers her eyes, he realizes how far gone the other Omega is.

‘Hannibal told me so,’ the young woman says, grimacing as if hearing how damning her words are.

Will smiles sadly, but he doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t need to.

Chiyoh frowns at him.

‘Hannibal took someone from you,’ she says. ‘Are you here to take someone from him?’

The thought had crossed my mind.

‘I’ve… forgiven him his trespasses,’ he murmurs. ‘As he’s forgiven mine.’

Chiyoh looks puzzled.

‘You’re *nakama*,’ she says. ‘Aren’t you alike?’

Will takes a deep breath, considering the question. As he does, he reaches for the little teapot and, picking it up by the woven handle, pours them both more tea.

‘If I were like Hannibal,’ he says, his voice rich with a purr, ‘I would have killed you already. Cooked you… ate you… And fed what was left of you to him.’ He quirks an eyebrow and takes a sip of steaming matcha. ‘That’s what *he* would do.’

‘You’ve given that some thought,’ Chiyoh says, her golden eyes coldly accusing. Will offers her a tiny, apologetic smile before sobering once more.

‘Do you know where he is?’ he asks, quietly desperate. Chiyoh narrows her eyes and shakes her head.

‘Why are you looking for him?’ she asks. ‘After he did *that* to you? … After he left you?’

Will glances down, a hand unconsciously drifting towards his abdomen. He thinks about the question, weighing it in his mind, and his brow creases.

‘I…’

Still love him. Miss him. Want to be with him. Want to kill him. Hold him. Touch him. Take him home.

None of these things are right. They’re not wrong, but they don’t encompass what Hannibal means to him.

‘I’ve never *known* myself… as well as I know myself when I’m with him,’ he admits, and that’s the truth of it.

He makes me whole.

Chiyoh looks down with a sigh, and Will knows she understands.

'You won't find Hannibal here,' the other Omega says. 'There are places on these grounds he cannot safely go.' She looks up, her eyes blazing. 'Bad memories.'

A child screaming. The thud of an axe. A deer skull rattling in a copper pot and the taste of broth on his lips, keeping him alive after the rabid Alphas murdered Mischa.

Will shivers, his skin pebbling.

'What do these grounds hold for *you?'* he asks, afraid of the answer but needing to know the truth.

Were you bonded to him before? Are you still bonded to him now?

Chiyoh grimaces.

'Hannibal wanted to kill that man for what he did to Mischa,' she says. 'I wouldn't let him take his life… So Hannibal left his life with me.'

If you'd turned him in back then, he would have gone free. Let him go now and he'll probably kill you.

'He was…' Will looks down and wets his lips, his breath catching. '*Curious* if you would kill.' He smiles, but it is mirthless. 'I imagine he still is.'

So am I.

***

Hannibal fantasizes about washing Will's hair for him that night. A simple thing, but emotionally charged.

Will lies back in the deep bath, rose-oiled water to his chin and head tipped back to allow his Alpha to soap and rinse his curls. The act is both sensual and threatening; Hannibal is caring for him, but he could slide his hand down and squeeze the life from him at any moment.

'What were you like as a young man?' Will murmurs, keeping his eyes closed and concentrating on the feel of strong fingers massaging his scalp, the heat of the water supporting his body and the scent of his Alpha in his nose.

Hannibal smiles at the question.

'I was rooting for Mephistopheles and contemptuous of Faust,' he replies, perfectly summing up his delight for chaos and wickedness.

Will hums a smile. He risks a look up at the other man, gazing at his sharp jaw and cruel lips; dark eyes gleaming high above him like the Morningstar.

‘Would you like to talk about your first spring lamb?’ he asks, and he feels the overly-careful stroking of soapy hands.

‘Would *you?’* the Alpha says, and Will thinks carefully before answering.

‘Why can’t you come home, Hannibal? What happened to you here?’ He tries to imagine them in the manor house, or even the hunting cottage, but Hannibal’s refusal to entertain such a thought keeps them rooted in the Florence apartment.

‘Nothing happened to me,’ Hannibal lies. ‘I happened.’

Will swallows back a whine, and instead arches his neck, unconsciously displaying himself for the other man even as poisonous words slither from his mouth.

‘How did your sister taste?’

I know what you did. I know you didn’t mean to, but it haunts you to this day. You ate her, and the only way you can make peace with it is to pretend you honor her with every other kill. Pretend you’re not trying to drown out the truth of consuming her flesh by replacing it with the taste of others.

Will’s reality shivers. There’s a great pull from Hannibal, his mind withdrawing, and Will feels himself slide down the bath. The water closes over his face, hot and dark and suffocating, and he’s drowning. He struggles, reaching for the surface, but the more he fights, the faster he sinks.

Let go. Wade into the quiet of the stream.

He’s not finished here.

Will opens his eyes, and he’s back in Lecter Estate, water dripping down the walls of the old basement. He breathes slowly and deeply, savoring the smell of damp and decay because it’s *real* and it means he’s not lost to the madness.

Clicking on the flashlight, Will swings the beam around just in time to see the caged Alpha pluck a snail from the bar of his cell and eat it, shell and all. The wasted man stares, blinded by the light, staying perfectly still as Will jams a tire iron between the rusty padlock and the cage door. He yanks, violent and determined, and the iron gives way under his ferocious effort.

The Alpha cowers. As Will pulls open the door and steps into the dungeon, the skeletal man cringes away from him, whining softly and curling up into a ball in the corner.

It doesn’t matter. Will strides forward, popping snail shells underfoot, and covers the Alpha’s head in a burlap sack.

Time to go.

***

He dumps him half a mile down the road from the estate. Will watches, emotionless, as the Alpha fall to his knees, overwhelmed by so much space, so many stars and the fresh breeze on his face.

'Kas as?' the man mutters, his breathing coming in short, panicked bursts. *'Kas as esu?'*

He reaches for Will, dirty fingers pawing at his coat, closing around the soft fabric. Will growls a warning, keeping the cold of the tire iron between their chests, and pushes a change of clothes at the Alpha.

'Go.'

As he turns to leave, the caged man comes after him, grabbing at his leg. Will pushes him away.

'Kas as esu?' the Alpha repeats, begging for the name of his savior. Will ignores him, making for the car, and the Alpha panics, grabbing again.

Will wheels around, pressing the tire iron into his chest and shoving him back.

'Go!' he snarls, his eyes flashing gold.

The Alpha hesitates only a moment, still swaying on weak legs. He stares, as if seeing a monster, bewildered that an Omega could act in such a way. When Will brandishes the tire iron again, he stumbles backwards, turns and then begins to run.

Will watches until the man's silhouette fades to darkness, swallowed by the shadows of the forest around them, and then he returns to the car and drives back to the house.

Chiyoh is a prisoner no longer.

***

At the Norman Chapel in Palermo, Jack Crawford lights a prayer candle for his Bella, his Omega, and, as the wick crackles and burns, blows out the stick with which he lit it.

'Are you a believer, Signor Crawford?' Inspector Pazzi asks, drawing close behind him, watching the Alpha gaze into the flame.

Jack hums softly, his lips curving into a dry smile.

'Aren't we all? Belief comes with imagination.' He turns to face the Omega. 'We also imagine the possibility that we all live on after death.' He sighs, his heart heavy. 'Will Graham *died*,' he says. 'His babies *died*. *Lui ero morto. Io ero morto.* He was *dead*. I was *dead*. We didn't imagine that.'

Pazzi narrows his eyes. He can't let himself think of the pain losing children must have caused. From their conversations, he knows that *Il Mostro* gutted his Omega before slicing off his crest, theoretically rendering him infertile and unbonded.

Cursed to be damaged and alone, for the rest of his life.

‘What does Will Graham imagine now?’ he asks, his voice weak at the thought of such a thing happening to him.

Jack sighs.

‘I borrowed his imagination,’ he says. ‘And I broke it. I don’t know *how* he managed to piece himself back together again. I don’t think I could.’

‘People come here to be closer to their God,’ Pazzi says. ‘Isn’t *that* what Will Graham was doing?’

My Alpha is my God, in all the ways that matter. She is my sun. My everything. Isn’t that how all Omegas feel about their mates?

‘Maybe.’ Jack shrugs. ‘Will Graham *understands* Hannibal… He… accepts him. Who among us doesn’t want understanding and acceptance?’

Hannibal has no idea what a special gift Will gave him. What Will is still giving to him, even now. Wherever he is.

***

The next evening, Chiyoh prepares another roasted pheasant for her prisoner. She wraps the bird in parchment, ties it with string and then takes it, as she always does, down to the caged Alpha in the cellar.

Her shotgun is under one arm; the lamp hanging from the other. She moves quickly and decisively. When she reaches the cell door, she sets the gun aside on a low wall, places the lamp beside her and then slides the parcel through the slot in the bars, just as always.

Only, this time, the Alpha lunges for her.

The cage door swings open, the lock missing, and the Alpha is on her in an instant. He snarls, his eyes blazing red, scent sharp with Rut.

Chiyoh falls backwards, knocked from her feet and winded by the force of the attack. She lands hard on her back and the Alpha pounces on her, straddling her waist and wrapping his grubby hands around her throat.

‘Atsiliepk, kalbek!’ the Alpha demands, shaking with the effort of strangling her, even as he begs her to speak to him.

Chiyoh struggles, her hand scrabbling across the flagstone floor. Gray spots dance before her eyes and she can feel a cold numbness spreading through her. There’s a moment of stillness, acceptance, and she stares up into the Alpha’s eyes, not as his victim but as his tormentor, and guilt robs the last of her strength as she whispers,

‘I’m *sorry*.’

Her gloved fingers close around a jagged pheasant bone, tossed out of the cage months ago by the Alpha. Chiyoh brings it up, a last, desperate attempt to survive, and jams it deep into the side of his neck.

The Alpha rears back and Chiyoh bucks, twisting so that she's the one on top. She wrenches the bone from him and blood spurts out, too fast to stop.

The man convulses, bloody spit frothing from his lips as he drowns in his own fluid. Chiyoh stares, horrified by what she's done, until the Alpha's arm drops away from his neck and he is eerily still.

It's over. She's killed him. After so many years… He died so fast.

Will is tending Mischa's grave when he hears her scream. He sets the last flower in the vase and then rises, hurrying into the house to check on her.

The other Omega is huddled by the wall when he enters the room. Chiyoh's hands and face are spattered with blood, her golden eyes wide and sightless as she stares at the prone body of the Alpha. The man she'd held captive for so long; whom she had resisted killing until now.

Snails are already crawling over his body, eager to devour his flesh. Will stares, shocked by the scene before him.

He hadn't expected the Alpha to return.

'You did this.' When Chiyoh speaks, her voice is soft but cutting. 'You set him free.'

'It was you I wanted to set free,' Will explains, drawing closer.

A tear rolls down Chiyoh's face.

'You said Hannibal was curious if I would kill… You were curious, too.'

Will swallows, his eyes flickering gold. He doesn't want to admit it, but he was.

'I didn't want *this*,' he says, and Chiyoh growls at him.

'Yes, you did! You were doing what *he* does.' She narrows her eyes. 'He'd be so proud of you. His Omega. His *nakama*.'

'Did you know?' Will asks, closing the last of the distance and crouching before her. 'At some level… you knew.'

Chiyoh studies him quietly, wondering if he's asking from experience. If he's done this sort of thing before.

What twisted games do they play with each other?

Will sighs, and pulls a knife from his pocket. Opening the blade, he tugs a dusty bottle of wine from one of the racks near Chiyoh's abandoned shotgun.

With a collection like this, no wonder Hannibal is such a wine connoisseur.

Tearing off the label, he twists the blade into the cork and pops it free, and then hands the bottle to Chiyoh.

She looks like she could use a drink.

‘He created a story,’ he says, ‘out of events that only he experienced.’ A grim smile. ‘“All sorrows can be borne if you put them in a story.”’

Chiyoh drinks, choking on the unfamiliar taste, and Will accepts the bottle from her as he eases himself onto the ground beside her, their backs to the wall, feet pointing towards the dead Alpha.

‘I never knew Mischa,’ Chiyoh says. ‘I only knew what Hannibal told me about her. What he told me was done to her.’ She looks at him. ‘He wasn't lying about that, was he?’

Will takes a swig of wine and then shakes his head.

‘No.’

Chiyoh nods, and then looks back at the Alpha.

‘For Mischa.’

She stands up, reeling slightly at the truth of what she’s done. The life she’s taken. Very deliberately, she collects her shotgun and trains it on Will.

‘I’ll help you find him.’

Will frowns up at her.

‘Why would you help me?’ he asks, curious as to the turn of events. Chiyoh’s lower lip wobbles, but she has no more tears left to cry.

‘I have no reason to stay here,’ she replies. ‘Not anymore. You saw to that.’

She walks away, leaving him alone. Will watches her go, feeling invisible fingers stroking his hair, down his neck, across his shoulders.

An imago is an image of a loved one. Buried in the unconscious. Carried with us all our lives.

He’s not a chrysalis, anymore. Hannibal has fed him, whispered to him, influenced and guided him. Dying… living again and losing his mind… pieces together the fragments of himself, like a stained glass window in church… they’re all stages of his final transformation.

He smashes a dozen bottles of vintage burgundies, shards of colored glass glittering in the candlelight, and attaches them to twigs and branches gathered from the forest outside. Pheasant feathers create a beautiful plumage, down floating in the silent air like dust motes.

The snails watch, silent observers as Will labors through the night. He threads a needle with sturdy black cotton, securing first the dead Alpha's arms across his chest and then his legs tight together. Cabbage leaves are next, sewn into his skin, wrapped in layers like the bandages of a mummified corpse.

Empty shells, glued together, form a single giant casing, enfolding the Alpha's lower half to give the appear of a chrysalis.

The hardest part is lifting the thing. Will secures ropes around the back of the body and the wings, heaving with all his strength on the rope pulley.

This is my design.

Snails cover the Alpha from head to toe, suckered to his cheek and eager to eat through the cabbage encasing him. Will gazes at his creation, pleased with the wings open out, and he secures the rope on a hook in the wall.

The man, once caged and useless, has now been transformed through death into a firefly, just as Will, through pain and death, has been transformed.

I'm ready to see you now.

***

He's coming.

Hannibal chooses a jaunty tune to play on the piano as he engages in a therapy session with Bedelia the next morning. Sunlight streams through the window of the apartment, warming his fingers as they dance over the ivory keys of the piano.

'What your sister made you feel was beyond your conscious ability to control or predict,' his fellow Alpha says, crossing her arms as she watches Hannibal distract himself from the difficulty of the conversation.

'Or negotiate,' Hannibal adds, and Bedelia hums her agreement before broaching the truly difficult part of the topic.

'I would *suggest* that what Will Graham makes you feel is not… dissimilar. A force of mind and circumstance.'

'Love,' Hannibal says, keeping his eyes trained on the keys, despite not needing to. He smiles, and, when he looks up, manages to keep the red from showing in his eyes. 'It pays you a visit or it doesn't.'

'Same with forgiveness,' Bedelia suggests. 'And, I would argue, the same with betrayal.'

'The god Betrayal, who presupposes the god Forgiveness,' Hannibal muses, the notes becoming sharper, more jarring as his emotion seeps into his hands.

'We can all betray,' Bedelia says sadly. 'Sometimes, we have no other choice.'

‘Mischa didn’t betray me,’ Hannibal snaps, looking up at her with cold warning. He will brook no insult to his sister’s memory. ‘She influenced me to betray myself, but I forgave her that influence.’

Bedelia closes her eyes.

‘If past behavior is an indicator of future behavior,’ she says, ‘… Then there is only one way you will forgive Will Graham.’

Hannibal stabs at the keys, three, four last chords and then, as the final notes rings into screaming silence, he looks up with a purr.

‘I know…’ He sighs. ‘I have to eat him.’

Aperitivo

Chapter Summary

Dr Frederick Chilton, having survived the shooting by Miriam Lass, returns in an attempt to unify Will, Alana and Jack Crawford against Hannibal Lecter.

Chapter Notes

Hey peeps... Gosh, I'm so sorry this has taken so long to update. I've been really struggling with writing in general over the last few weeks (blame the pandemic, I suppose). I've been immersing myself more in Batman fics as a way to avoid reality (because, hey, ABO Hannigram isn't separate enough, apparently...)

Anyway, hopefully I can get my groove back and update again soon! In the meantime, enjoy.

P.S. THE BABIES ARE ALIVE. I promise. Will's mental state is badly fractured and his sense of time and reality is very muddled, especially when he's visited by Dr Chilton, and he's so scared that the twins are dead that he can't let himself believe they're okay.

I PROMISE THEY ARE.

Four

Aperitivo

The bullet leaves the muzzle of Miriam Lass's gun at 200km/hr. It shatters the mirrored glass of the interview room, zaps through the air, skimming Alana Bloom's hair, and enters Fredrick Chilton's left cheek, just below the eye.

'Each of us, whose life intersected Hannibal Lecter… lost something. A limb here… A lung there… A few feet of intestines…'

The bullet crushes the cornea of his eye and rips through muscle like tissue paper. Teeth shatter, his jaw and cheekbone splinter and the small piece of metal punches it way through

his brain, bisecting the left temporal lobe before exploding out the back of his skull and embedding deep in the wall behind him.

Dr Chilton thinks the bullet may still be there, but he won't go back to check. His recovery from Dr Gideon's attack had been bad enough. His recovery from Hannibal's attack – courtesy of Miss Lass – has been significantly worse.

Now, standing in the opulent master bedroom at Muskrat Farm, Dr Chilton can't help but feel pity for the creature before him.

'The dead,' he says, swallowing hard at the thought of what Hannibal Lecter had done to Mason Verger; wondering what remained of his face after the attack, 'The dead… at least have the luxury of being… *done* with what they lost.'

I miss beef so much, but I can't risk eating too much protein.

'You and I,' he adds, narrowing a red-ringed eye at the Beta, 'we still *itch*.'

Itch to do what was done to us. Itch to enact our revenge.

Behind his plastic prosthetic mask, Mason Verger manages a dry little chuckle.

'That little *itch* must be telling you something,' he says, his voice even more nasal than before, the consonants lost from his speech; courtesy of Dr Hannibal Lecter and his slut, Will Graham.

Standing atop an inset aquarium, in which Mason's vicious moray eel glides, Dr Chilton takes a step closer and clasps both hands on the handle of his walking cane before him. His right eye gleams a dull red as the iris thickens with a crimson band of keen interest.

'Would you like to discuss what that little itch is telling you?' he asks, smirking softly as he dangles the bait before the injured Beta.

Unwilling to lose his ground in the verbal sparring with a damaged Alpha, Mason Verger asks, with an obvious sneer in his mangled voice,

'Are you wearing *makeup?'* At Dr Chilton's uncomfortable fidget, his blue eyes gleam. 'How long does it take you to put your face on in the morning, hm?'

To his credit, Dr Chilton doesn't flinch again.

'Now that I've got the routine down, no time at all,' he replies, affecting a bored drawl. Mason likes it. He'll give the good Doctor what he wants.

'Tell you what,' he purrs, his breathing apparatus feeding him more oxygen as excitement makes his heart pound. 'You show me yours, and I'll show you mine.'

What scars have those two bastards left us with?

Dr Chilton considers the request for a moment and then decides it's worth the discomfort of being seen. He lifts a hand to his left eye, removing the contact lens giving the damaged eyeball color and definition. Behind the lens is a mess of scarred sclera and clouded iris. The pupil was blasted wide but scar tissue prevents him from seeing. The eye may as well be made of glass for all the good it does him now.

In response, Mason Verger lifts a weak, wasted hand to his chin, loosening the neck brace and pulling it away from the paper-thin, scarred flesh of his throat.

Next, Dr Chilton takes a Hermès handkerchief from his inner pocket, wiping away the thick layer of foundation and setting powder. The scar beneath is dark and puckered; testament to the gaping wound the surgical team had been unable to sew up.

The scar on the back of his skull is worse, but thankfully the hair transplant took and it's only visible in strong daylight, now.

Mason removes his face mask, struggling to breathe independently through the pin-prick slits that remain of his nostrils. His face is a mess of skin grafts expended over bone and what little muscle they could salvage. Nose-less and lipless, his face has a sunken, skull-like quality to it. He looks like a creature of the deep ocean; something that should never be brought to the surface to see the light of day.

Dr Chilton slides the dentures from the left side of his mouth. Upper jaw only; he thankfully has enough molars left on the bottom to still chew, though he prefers soft foods these days.

Once the denture is removed, his cheek loses all structure. The skin sags, making his eye droop, and the true extent of the damage is revealed.

Mason sighs, his tongue working to wet what little skin is left where his lips used to be.

'There,' he says, feeling dizzy from the effort of revealing himself. 'Now we can talk face to face.'

Or, what's left of them.

'I understand you have offered quite a *substantial* reward for any kind of relevant information on Hannibal Lecter,' Dr Chilton says, meeting Mason's eyes firmly from across the space between them. 'Not just the usual apprehension and conviction.'

'Yes,' Mason replies, unashamed of it. 'A million dollars. One million. We advertised worldwide. A high price for a fancy pig.'

Dr Chilton steps closer.

'Hannibal *would* be a prize pig if I had him in my hospital,' he says, 'but *you* do not intend to see him institutionalized, do you?'

Mason tilts his head as best he can – his spinal column was fractured in several places by Dr Lecter's meticulous twist, rendering him weak and mostly paralyzed from the chin down. The

numbness is odd; spreading half across his face and down all but one arm, as well as affecting his lungs.

‘I’m saying nothing that would force you to break the bonds of doctor-patient confidentiality,’ he says, and Dr Chilton gives him a lop-sided smirk.

‘You don’t want a *therapist*,’ he says. ‘You want a *profiler*.’ He huffs, wishing the Beta had just been honest when he’d accepted his initial request to meet.

Mason narrows his eyes.

‘I want to understand Hannibal Lecter to better understand myself,’ he replies, and Dr Chilton shrugs.

‘You survived him,’ he says simply. ‘That is chief amongst what you need to understand.’

‘“Survived him”?’ Mason’s voice rises with incredulity. ‘That implies fortune or skill on my part that somehow allowed me to live!’ He splutters, choking as his throat refuses to swallow his spit. ‘No. This is *exactly* how he intended me to live.’ Working his jaw as much as he can, Mason tries to grind his teeth in anger. ‘I know somewhere Dr Lecter is going to and fro in the earth and walking up and down it, and, very likely, having a good, *fun* time.’

He gasps, struggling to breathe, and Dr Chilton draws closer to the bed as he waits for the Beta to catch his breath.

‘How do you relieve the agony of waiting for Dr Lecter’s capture?’ he asks, his undamaged eye glowing crimson as the first hint of Rut hormones hit his system. ‘What do you fantasize about?’ When Mason stays silent, Dr Chilton continues, ‘… I wonder what would *happen* if Hannibal Lecter was in your hands…’

‘I worry we’re heading into territory not secured by your *fee*,’ Mason warns, and he runs his tongue over the back of his teeth with a dismissive hiss. ‘I think I need to look elsewhere for somebody to tend to my emotional wellbeing. Goodbye, Dr Chilton.’

Dr Chilton sniffs and smirks one last time. So, Mason Verger *is* planning to catch and kill Dr Lecter. Pity. He’ll just have to catch him first.

‘Happy hunting,’ he says, and leaves the Beta to his schemes.

He has plans of his own to enact.

***

‘We couldn’t leave without you.’

The nuchalectomy blade slices through muscle like it butter, slicing through the layers of tissue to get at the most vulnerable part of him.

The baby. Hannibal, the baby!

Will clings to his Alpha, silently screaming for him to stop, to please just *stop*, but Hannibal doesn't. He *doesn't,* and it gets worse because then he uses the same blade, slick with abdominal blood, to slice off the crest on the back of Will's neck, severing hundreds of nerves and leaving nothing but a shredded flap of skin where his ridged scar had been.

The pain is bad. It snatches his breath and turns his blood to ice, even as it pours out of him. But what's worse is the feeling of falling; the rapid, spiraling and uncontrollable descent into madness.

Put your head back. Close your eyes. Wade into the quiet of the stream.

'It's called a *Koboi*,' Hannibal says, holding the blade up for Will to see, even as his brain sizzles. 'A traditional knife used in the punitive Cutting of wayward Omegas.'

Will thinks he screamed, but he's not sure. Maybe he doesn't have the breath to scream. It's too much, too much and his mind is splintering, fractures widening until the pressure spills over and he shatters.

Dreams become nightmares. Nightmares become waking horrors.

He drifts in the darkness of his mind, slipping between the

Pieces come together slowly; a fragment here, a speck there. Nothing whole, nothing solid, and held together so tenuously that the slightest knock sends him reeling back into the hot darkness of insanity.

He sleeps and he wakes, over and over until he can no longer tell the difference between dreams and the waking world.

The pain is constant. The pressure on his abdomen is constant until it's not.

The baby.

His Pops is there, comforting him. The babies are there; twins, a girl and a boy. Gracie and Danny.

Will drifts in and out of madness, his body healing even as his mind tears itself apart. He imagines himself carrying for the twins; feeding them, changing them… Learning to cope as a single parent with his dad watching over him, offering silent moral support.

He tires himself out too easily. Too often. Dr Shapiro despairs of him ever stabilizing. He knows he does. There's a dark, haunted look in his eyes every time he asks him the question.

'How do you feel?'

The edges of the room blur. Reality blurs with the dream he'd been having. A party; a hundred well-to-do Alphas and their Omegan companions. Hannibal, casually sophisticated in a leather jacket and jeans, not drinking the champagne but pretending to.

A wolf among the sheep.

'Thirsty,' Will croaks, uncertain why there are electrodes on his bare chest, when in his mind he's dressed in a navy suit, drinking hundred-dollar champagne by the bottle.

Is he drunk? Is that why he's floating?

A plastic straw nudges his lips and he sucks, rewarded with tepid water sweet as nectar.

'Feel up for a visitor?' the doctor asks, moving away before Will can do more than nod.

How long has he been here? How long has it been since the attack? Since Hannibal gutted him and slit Abigail's throat?

How long since he lost everyone he ever loved.

No doubt the FBI want to question him. He's bonded – *was* bonded, God… no… – to the Chesapeake Ripper.

Please… please just let me die. I don't want to be here alone.

A dark shape moves behind the frosted glass. The shadow draws closer, taking form, and the monitor registers a jump in Will's pulse.

Abigail…

He wants it to be her. Wants it so badly it hurts. But it's not. It's not; it's Dr Chilton. Who granted him access to visit? Is he past the point of immediate family only? Or does Pops think that maybe Frederick Chilton would be a better suitor than Hannibal?

The idea makes Will want to vomit.

When is it? Has he spoken to Frederick before? Why does he feel drugged? Floating and untethered, a kite with a broken string…

The diminutive Alpha wanders closer, sharply dressed in a designer suit, cradling an enormous bunch of flowers.

The nurse cradled Gracie that way… I remember she did… Please… Please tell me that was real.

'Hello, Frederick,' Will sighs, disappointment leeching what little strength he has from his voice.

Dr Chilton offers a self-deprecating smile.

‘You were expecting someone else?’

‘I was *hoping* for someone else,’ Will admits, and Frederick nods, considering the reply. His right eye flashes red, the undamaged iris flooding with color as Alpha hormones pour through him at the idea of an Omega – any Omega – being hurt.

‘He knew exactly how to cut you,’ he says, voice tight with anger and regret. ‘To do the most amount of damage, without killing you…’ He swallows. ‘They said it was surgical. The precision with which he removed your crest… He wanted you to live.’

‘He left us to die,’ Will whispers, a tear rolling down his cheek at the memory of the pain. At the memory of feeling so utterly lost and abandoned.

My baby… My babies… Did they survive?

Abigail, his sweet child-killer, stares back at him. She’s wearing the same outfit as the night she died. Her skin is waxy, her throat slashed and crimson dried in great splashes down her jacket.

‘But we didn’t,’ she replies, and Will *remembers* holding his daughter. *Remembers* reaching through the hole in the incubator of Intensive Care and holding his son’s tiny, bandaged hand…

As Will blinks wetness from his eyes, Frederick sighs and approaches the bed.

‘Couple of suckers we’ve been,’ he says, grimacing at his own failings. ‘Set us up… Knocked us down.’ He frowns. ‘What bothers me the *most* is… I think it was easy for him. Shooting monkeys in a barrel.’

You don’t know him. You don’t know anything about him. How he thinks. How he feels.

Lying prone in his hospital bed, his abdomen re-stitched after tearing the sutures of his c-section, Will stares up at Dr Chilton, too weak to argue with him. There’s no point, anyway. Dr Chilton has never listened to him.

‘You were bonded to him,’ Frederick says, rolling his eyes. ‘I don’t know *what* my excuse was.’

‘Compulsive imitation,’ Will suggests, his voice rasping from thirst. How long has he been out for this time? It comes in waves; darkness and dreaming, the sound of water and the feeling of razors across his skull…

‘How dull,’ Frederick replies, feigning a shudder. ‘But maybe…’ He gestures to the flowers and then sets the bouquet down on the side table as he adds, ‘I am learning all *sorts* of new things about myself these days.’ He lingers by the bed, gazing down with a feral, hungry gleam in his remaining eye. ‘I’m learning new things about *you*, too…’

The twins… Does he know about the twins? They won’t be safe if he does.

‘Imitation allows us to better understand the behavior of others,’ Will says, trying to distract Frederick from probing too much about the pregnancy.

Dr Chilton gazes at the Omega before him. The man who *Pair Bonded* Dr Hannibal Lecter, suffered through excessive prodrome and bore the Chesapeake Ripper’s child, only to have it cut out of him at the last moment.

Will’s probably been rendered infertile. Such a waste.

‘I have great empathy for you, Will,’ he murmurs. ‘Both us eviscerated and accused… I have *literally* felt your pain.’

I doubt it, Will thinks, but instead he simply smiles grimly and says,

‘We have matching scars.’

‘You need a *friend*, friend,’ Fredrick says, easing himself down into the chair beside the bed. The lingering scent of a Beta male sits there, heavy with cheap aftershave and engine oil. A nurse has been here, too; she must do a round in the maternity unit because she smells of baby milk. ‘You will leave this hospital, alone, your guardianship in question and under a cloud of suspicion.’

‘Not a cloud,’ Will says. ‘A fog.’

Frederick’s good eye burns like a hot ember.

‘I can help you heal. I can help you get Hannibal Lecter out of your head,’ he promises, but Will snorts at the transparency of the lie.

‘And into your hospital.’

Frederick’s lips thin at the being caught out, but Alphas are nothing if not consistent.

‘There’s opportunity here,’ he says, ‘For both of us. We can *catch* the man who framed and maimed us.’

Will swallows, hating the lump in his throat. His chin wobbles and he has to take a moment to steady his voice before he speaks.

‘There’s no opportunity here, Frederick,’ he says, soft with longing and regret. ‘Not for you.’

No matter what he’s done, I’m still his. He’s my Alpha; the father of my children. And I’ll never make the mistake of trying to cage him again.

Frederick considers the stubborn, stupid Omega before him, still so desperately clinging to the hope that the man to whom he was bonded might somehow be redeemed.

Foolish.

‘The optimist believes we live in the best of all possible worlds,’ he says. ‘The pessimist… they fear this is true.’ He leans closer, smothering the vulnerable Omega with his scent. ‘This *is* your best possible world, Will. You’re not getting a better one.’ He smiles, but it isn’t nice. ‘Your Alpha *gutted* you. He murdered your surrogate daughter *and* your unborn child. Most likely, he left you infertile. Scarred and broken, unable to bear any future children.’

That’s not true… It’s not true, Will thinks, desperate for the Alpha to leave; to take his choking scent and his flowers from the room. To make space for his children and his dad to return.

‘Get out,’ he whispers, glaring up through a haze of tears, ignoring the flutter of panic in his chest as the Alpha’s features begin to shift, subtly rearranging themselves into cruel lips, sharp cheekbones and a high forehead…

Hannibal.

‘What other possible world could we have built together?’ his Alpha murmurs, reaching out to place a gold-rimmed teacup in the center of Will’s chest.

What would you have done, if you could go back and do things differently?

***

It starts raining just as Jack sits down at the dinner table. Will glances to the left, out of the patio doors at the far end of the room, watching water trickle down the panes like blood.

Soon.

The table is set as for a feast. Alphan posturing at its finest; peacock feathers, pomegranates and yellow cauliflowers to imitate the sun that Jack will never see again after tonight.

They’re serving lamb. A sacrifice, for their new life together.

As the smell of roasted meat wafts in on the warm air, Will presses a hand to the beginnings of a bump, just pressing up against his belt. Their baby, sleeping soundly inside him.

Hannibal glides into the room, handsome in a pale gray suit and silk tie. He carries the rack of lamb on a silver platter, setting it down in pride of place in the middle of the settings.

‘Smells delicious,’ Jack says, the compliment easy to say in their last meal together. Hannibal smiles, the humble, gracious host, and unbuttons his jacket to sit down across from his mate.

‘To new beginnings,’ he says, raising his glass of Chianti. ‘And old friends.’

Jack and Will lift their wineglasses to the toast and Will takes a sip, holding the blood-red liquid on his tongue for a long moment before swallowing. He can hear his heart, starting dim but getting louder. Getting faster. He glances at Jack, at his friend, his mentor, his former boss...

Jack, who gives Will an unspoken communication -- an almost imperceptible nod that doubles as a signal.

Now.

Will glances at Hannibal. His Alpha. His mate. His partner. Hannibal, who offers a decisive glance – a cue of his own.

Will's heart skips a beat and begins to race.

Now.

Jack's arm tenses, just a fraction. He's about to reach for his gun. But Will is not just a spectator in this scenario; he is a participant, and his pulse grows faster still. In that instant, he makes his decision and grabs Jack's arm, stopping his draw.

The Alpha's eyes widen. Jack is hurt; stunned by his betrayal. Will's heartbeat reaches a hammering tattoo in his chest, bruising his ribs, but he can't stop now.

He made his choice. He chose Hannibal. He chose his family.

I love him.

Hannibal rises, wasting no time. He picks up the carving knife and draws it, swift and vicious, across Jack's throat.

The skin parts, blood spurts and Will holds on tight as the other man struggles, fighting his death as surely as Will would fight his own.

'I had to,' he whispers, his skin burning wherever Jack's blood touches him. He looks up, gazing with golden eyes into Hannibal's Rut-red ones. 'We belong together.'

Hannibal drops the knife. The blade clatters across the floor, spattering blood up the table leg and across the boards.

In his chair, Jack slumps, gasping and choking as the last of his life seeps from his throat.

'Come to me,' Hannibal whispers, holding out his hand, his face flecked with crimson and all the more beautiful for it. 'Will; come to me.'

Will shoves his chair back and hurries around the table. He's feverish; desperate to feel his Alpha inside him, over him, around him. Keeping him safe. Loving him. Owning him.

'Was it ideal that Jack die?' Hannibal asks, enfolding him in his arms as Will throws himself into the embrace.

Before he can answer, before he can center himself amidst the swirling chaos of his new reality, Will presses a fierce, furious kiss to his Alpha's lips. He can taste the wine, Hannibal's unique tang and copper; Jack's blood is saturating the air and he's swooning with it.

‘It was necessary,’ he pants, clutching tight to Hannibal’s waist as his knees grow weak. ‘What happened to Jack was… preordained. Had to happen… In some other world *didn’t* happen…’

Hannibal glances down at him, irises thickly ringed with red, dancing with strange, dangerous lights.

‘You were thinking of betraying me,’ he purrs, sliding a hand through Will’s curls, cupping the side of his face and gazing into his eyes, worshiping him by touch and sight. ‘How different this night could have been.’

‘You might have left,’ Will says, running his hands up Hannibal’s back to hold onto his broad shoulders, relishing the lean muscles roping the other man’s body, pulling their hips flush together. ‘You could have disappeared into the night.’

‘We couldn’t leave without you,’ Hannibal replies, and Will tilts his head in question, rewarded with another kiss and a wink. ‘Come with me,’ Hannibal says, taking Will’s hand and leading him from the room. ‘I have a surprise for you.’

‘A surprise?’ Will follows close behind, trailing Hannibal upstairs and down the landing to their bedroom. ‘What…?’

His voice dies in his throat as Hannibal pushes open the door. His attention narrows to the young Beta before the fireplace, dressed for hunting in a khaki jacket and dark jeans. Her brown hair is pulled up into a high ponytail, revealing the garish gap where her ear was cut.

‘Abigail,’ he whispers, grabbing hold of the doorframe for support, shock robbing the remaining strength from his legs. Tears run down his cheeks, but he doesn’t make a move to wipe them away. He just stares at their daughter, his heart pounding and palms tingling.

‘I made a place for all of us,’ Hannibal murmurs, coming up behind him and hugging Will back to his chest, enfolding their hands across Will’s belly. ‘Together.’

‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,’ Abigail whispers, blue eyes flicking from Hannibal to Will, nervous about her Will’s reaction. ‘I didn’t know what to do, so… I just did what he told me…’

‘No,’ Will whispers, stumbling free of Hannibal’s hold to grab Abi in a tight hug. ‘No, don’t be sorry… I’m just… I’m so *happy*.’

‘Time *did* reverse,’ Hannibal says, drawing closer again and wrapping his arms around them both, tucking both brown heads under his chin. ‘The teacup that I shattered *did* come together.’

We’re a family again. And nothing can ever tear us apart.

***

They would have been in Florence by now.

Soldering the gears of his reclaimed boat engine, Will hefts the metal onto the bracket and slots them into place, tightening the nuts to keep them in place for the journey ahead.

The engine had been a mess of rust and cheap steel when he'd bought it at a salvage yard last month. His first act as a free man since leaving the hospital.

The gears fit together as perfectly as his body used to fit against Hannibal's. As perfectly as their minds *still* fit together. Flawless. Seamless. Two halves of the same whole.

He's never missed him as much as he does right now.

Working in the shed tucked behind the farmhouse, a woolen hat pulled down over his ears and a thick, waved coat on to keep him warm, Will can almost, *almost* pretend he's in in Florence, and not Wolf Trap.

Dr Roman and his Omega, Mr Luther Fell. Their daughter, Abigail and their son, Daniel… That's Hannibal's fantasy. My own includes Gracie, in a crib beside her brother. All of us, happy.

Or, at the very least, together.

He's not broken enough to think that being with Hannibal will ever bring lasting happiness. Peace with a serial killer is fleeting; Hannibal will always toy with him, test and push him for his own amusement, always curious to see how he'll react to different stimuli and scenarios.

But there is a calm to be found with the Alpha. A sense of stability in the predictability of the torture.

Hannibal had been so hurt, so *lost* after he'd Cut Will. After he'd gutted him, almost certainly thinking he'd killed their baby and rendered him infertile…

I did that to him. I hurt him in a way he didn't think he could still be hurt.

The knowledge is humbling. And hateful. Will hates that he did that to Hannibal. Even after everything… After the prodrome and the asylum, after Abigail and Beverly…

We're perfect opposites. He doesn't feel anything, and I feel it all.

But he did get through to him. He made him feel something, even for a little while. A flicker of humanity, creeping back through the darkness of his psychosis.

If I reached him once, maybe I can do it again.

He doesn't even know why he's going to Europe. He just knows he has to find him. He has to be with him.

Even if it's to kill him.

Focused on the engine, he doesn't hear the crunch of tires on the snowy drive outside. Doesn't hear as Jack Crawford climbs from his SUV, fedora pulled low, leather gloves on and

scarf tucked into his jacket, shoulders hunched against the bitter Virginia wind.

Winter again. It's hard to believe it's almost been a year.

There's an old pickup next to Will's Volvo. He knows from the Louisiana registration plate that it belongs to Will's father, Bill Graham.

He hadn't expected him to still be here. Will has recovered; that's what the hospital report says.

As much as any Cut Omega *can* recover, at least.

He doesn't bother with the house; he can see a large sailboat in mid-construction, the hull freshly oiled and painted, new sails tightly folded against the elements. Behind that, in the barn, Will is clearly working on the motor.

The dogs greet him, their tails wagging, but he isn't a threat so they don't bark a warning. As Jack walks, fresh snow drifts from the sky, speckling Winston's brown coat with white.

It's only when he approaches the open doorway to the barn that Will finally pauses his work. The Omega glances back over his shoulder at him, blue eyes flashing gold, fingers trembling before resuming their methodical tightening of nuts and bolts.

Jack sighs. Not the warmest of welcomes. It doesn't bode well.

'I had hoped you would come look for me,' he says, leaning back against the wooden doorframe and crossing his arms over his chest. 'But I understand why you didn't.'

No, you don't, Will thinks, though the scream dies before it reaches his lips. Instead, he forces his breath out in a sigh, trying not to inhale too much of the Alpha's scent when he takes a breath to speak.

'What I can do for you, Jack?'

'Well, I'm here to, er…' Jack pauses, choosing his words with care. '… make sure you don't *contradict* the official narrative.'

Will sniffs against the cold, fine tremors wracking his frame.

'Uh-huh.'

Jack narrows his eyes, feeling the irises prickle red at Will's non-comital answer.

'Well, we're officers of the FBI,' he says, his tone sharpening as he reminds Will of the report. '*Wounded* in the course of heroic duty. You, an Omega, trapped in an unwanted mating, manipulated into committing murders by your psychopathic Alpha… And I… I managed to rescue you whilst attempting to take down the Chesapeake Ripper.'

Will chokes down bile and reaches for the final bolt to secure the gears in place.

‘Well, that’s not true for *either* of us,’ he replies, his tone waspish at the accusation of him being manipulated.

Poor little Omega. Helpless against his big bad Alpha.

I knew exactly what I was doing. And I’d do it again, in a heartbeat.

‘Well, we were supposed to go together,’ Jack concedes, nodding at the back of the other man’s head. ‘That’s… that’s on me. My foul. My bad.’

Abigail’s death is on me. Your wounds are on me.

‘Not all of our choices are consciously calculated,’ Will murmurs, his voice shaking as he struggles to put into words the bond with Hannibal.

‘No,’ Jack agrees, adjusting his glove to give him an excuse to stretch out the hand curling into a fist. ‘But our *decisions* are.’ When Will continues to hold his tongue, Jack purses his lips and sighs. ‘Do you remember when you decided to call Hannibal?’

Will swallows the lump in his throat.

‘I… deliberated… while the phone rang,’ he says, trying for a light, offhand tone. He’s not sure he pulls it off. ‘I decided… when I heard his voice.’

I decided when I felt my crest throb at the sound of his voice. When I thought about losing him.

‘You told him we knew,’ Jack growls, allowing some of his fury at the betrayal seep into his voice.

‘I told him to leave,’ Will replies. He told him in the same way that Hannibal told Garrett Jacob Hobbs. A shared secret, only they understood.

He’d been curious what I would do, if the Alpha was waiting for me. I was curious what he would do, if he knew Jack was on his way.

I had no idea it would go so horribly wrong.

‘I wanted him to run,’ he admits, his voice dropping to a whisper as his eyes fill with tears. He knows what Jack will ask next, and he knows, he *knows*, he’ll finally have to tell him the truth. The whole of it.

‘Why?’ Jack snaps, frustrated and angry at the stupid, stubborn Omega in front of him.

Will shakes his head, letting his trembling hands rest on the engine for fear of dropping the remaining parts from numb fingers.

‘Um…’ He tries to speak. Tries to find the right words. To help Jack understand. ‘Because… he…’ He gulps. ‘He was my *mate*. And…’ He ducks his head, tears falling down his cheeks. ‘And I was *pregnant*.’ He glances up, his golden eyes unfixed as he stares into nothing, the

truth drawn from him like poison from a wound. ‘And because I wanted to run away with him.’

I chose him, Jack. Him. Not you.

Jack stares, his heart stumbling, shock making his ears ring.

‘You…’ He shakes his head, trying to clear the buzz. ‘You were *pregnant?’* When Will doesn’t say anything, he continues, ‘With Hannibal’s child? The *Ripper’s* child?’

‘*My* child,’ Will growls, turning to face him, a dirty rag between his hands. He’s done with the engine for now, and he’s more than done with this conversation. ‘My *children*.’

‘You…’ Jack swears under his breath and then he’s moving. He closes the distance in two strides and grabs Will by the front of his jacket, hauling him closer to glare into his face, his eyes blazing crimson. ‘Why didn’t you *tell* me?’ he demands, giving the Omega a shake. ‘How long had you known?’

‘I hadn’t told *anyone*,’ Will hisses, bringing his hands up to hold onto Jack’s wrists, reminding him of the inappropriate grip without fighting it. ‘Not even my father.’

‘Jesus, Will…’ Jack releases him and slumps backwards, rubbing a hand over his grizzled face. ‘He *Cut you*… Gutted you... He…’ He stares up, horror leeching the color from his cheeks. ‘Oh my God… He knew, didn’t he? Hannibal… He knew you were… And he still…’

Will’s lungs shrink, squeezing the breath from him. He manages a nod, the nape of his neck stinging like a fresh burn.

‘Yes.’

He wanted to terminate the pregnancy. He wanted to take everything from me.

Jack shakes his head, tears shining in his eyes.

‘I’m sorry,’ he manages, staring at the man before him, unable to imagine the horror of having a bond shattered, having a crest shorn off as well as losing an unborn child at the hands of the Alpha who – ‘God, Will… If I can do *anything* –’

‘You can keep your mouth shut,’ Will snaps, tossing the rag down and walking past Jack towards the house. ‘You keep my secret and I’ll keep yours.’

‘Will…’ Jack follows him, slipping his way towards the back porch. He catches up with the Omega as Will pauses to remove his boots in the back of the kitchen, and then pulls up short when he sees the pair of highchairs by the breakfast counter.

‘Hey, Pops?’ Will calls, pulling his hat off and shrugging out of his jacket. ‘Have the twins had their feed, yet?’

‘Will.’ Jack grabs Will’s elbow and raises his eyebrows, flabbergasted, when Will looks at him.

‘Hannibal *cannot* find out,’ the Omega growls, and Jack nods, letting go as he spies movement in the doorway.

Bill Graham looks from his son to the hulking Alpha just behind him. He has Gracie in his arms, the infant squirming in his grip at the sight of her father and the promise of formula.

‘Everythin’ alrigh’?’ he asks, suspicion adding a sharper twang to his Southern drawl. ‘Wan’ me to help with the feedin’?’

‘Pops, this is Jack Crawford,’ Will says, by way of introduction. When Jack steps forward with his hand outstretched to shake, Bill does so with narrowed eyes.

‘So, you’re the Alpha responsible for puttin’ my son in danger on the regular,’ he says, giving Jack the briefest shake he can get away with. ‘Wish I could say it’s good t’meet ya.’

‘Your son’s an exceptional FBI Investigator, Mr Graham,’ Jack says, allowing the Beta his display of protectiveness. He admires that sort of strength. It’s honorable. ‘He’s saved a lot of lives.’

‘Can you give us a minute?’ Will asks, taking Gracie from his father and nuzzling the soft golden hair on her head. ‘I’ll feed ‘em in here.’

‘Sure,’ Bill says, turning away with his familiar loping walk to fetch Daniel from the playpen in the front room.

Will settles Gracie into her highchair and Jack sits at the dining table nearby, watching with an odd mixture of awe and unease as the infant manages to steady herself enough to sit up against the padded backrest.

‘How old are they?’ he asks, trying to work out the timeline in his head, unnerved by the similarity to Hannibal that he can see in the cheekbones and brows of the child.

Will, holding Danny close as he moves around the kitchen preparing two bottles of formula, glances at Jack and his daughter.

‘Six months next week,’ he murmurs, giving the first bottle a vigorous shake to mix the powder and water together. ‘It’s part of why I was in the hospital for so long.’

That, he thinks, kissing Daniel’s brown curls, *and this little guy needed more help even after his lungs developed.*

‘What’s the status of your legal guardianship?’ Jack asks, watching Will as the Omega prepares the second bottle.

The question stings and Will focuses on the hot water going into Daniel’s milk bottle, instead of the ugly emotions swirling in his chest. It takes a while for him to find his voice and, when he speaks, it’s weak.

‘I… don’t know.’

He can't bring himself to look at Jack as he returns to the table, both bottles in one hand, Daniel in the other and two muslin cloths over his shoulder. He focuses on the task at hand, securing a bib around each baby's neck and settling Daniel into the crook of his arm, the smaller twin less able to sit up whilst being fed.

'Need any help?' Jack asks, though he makes no move to interfere. He doesn't know the first thing about kids, after all, and these are *Hannibal Lecter's* children.

The thought makes him cringe.

'I've got it,' Will mutters, holding the bottle in place as Gracie feeds, one-handedly feeding Daniel at an awkward angle certain to give him wrist-ache. 'Do it all the time.'

Jack nods, glancing towards the doorway through which Bill Graham disappeared.

'How long's your Dad staying with you?' he asks, more to make conversation than out of a real desire to know.

'Long as it takes,' Will replies, adjusting Gracie's bottle so she doesn't swallow air. 'Listen, Jack… I won't risk the official narrative. I won't say anything to anyone.'

Jack hums, and then turns sharp eyes on the Omega.

'What's with the boat, Will?'

Will attempts a shrug without disturbing the feeding babes.

'Just a project,' he says. 'Something to keep my mind occupied.'

It's not a lie. Not really. It is a project… To fix the boat and find Hannibal. It's the only thing keeping my mind from shattering every morning when I wake up.

'Is it helping?' Jack asks, allowing him the lie. 'Having something to focus on?'

'It's better than nothing,' Will mutters. 'It's really just a way to pass the time.'

That's really all I'm doing, now, he thinks, returning his attention to the babes. *Passing time until I'm with Hannibal again.*

Until I can kill him.

***

The sound of breaking glass is almost… musical. Fractured shards tinkle as they shatter on the ground, glistening in the streetlight.

Alana doesn't register the pain at first. When she lands, the breath is knocked out of her so much that she panics, and the feeling of drowning occupies her mind. Then, as oxygen rushes back into her brain, millions of nerves fire, warning her of the agony in her broken body.

Distantly, she's aware that Will drapes his coat over her, protecting her shock-cold body from the rain pouring down, but it is Hannibal who leaves. The Alpha doesn't look at her; his fiery red eyes are wet with tears, and he simply steals the coat from her, wrapping it tight around his bloodstained shirt before disappearing into the night.

That was a month ago.

Now, lying alone in a sterile chamber lit by frosted glass lights, she tries not to think about that night. Tries not to think about the damage done by the fall.

Tries not to think about the fact that she may never walk again.

Her hips are pinned in place by spokes, attached to a semi-circle frame above her pelvis. It looks like the wheel to a carriage, and she can't help but think of the old Medieval torture device known as the Breaking Wheel.

I've been bent and twisted out of shape… Physically and mentally.

The air, once still but for her gentle, deliberate breaths, stirs. Alana's senses sharpen and her nostrils flare. She can smell flowers; lilies and chrysanthemums, roses and something else, something she doesn't know. Cologne; expensive but distasteful. Hair gel, wool and leather, and all of it masking the subtly different scent of Frederick Chilton.

'What I said before, I will say again,' he purrs, sauntering into the ICU suite and approaching Alana from the end of the bed. Uncovered, her bare body is mottled with bruises and cuts, each wound slowly healing in the warm air. 'Which is something you *cannot* say.' He smirks. 'That I did not warn you.'

Told you so.

The juvenile taunt makes her want to snarl at him. Instead, she does her best not to even clench her jaw; the slightest movement sends shockwaves of pain through her body and if she doesn't hold perfectly still, the damage to her spine could be irreparable.

'Cannot see what you will not see,' she replies, wishing she had more than just bandages over her breasts and white panties under the hip brace. Frederick's gaze is lecherous.

'Until it shoves you out a window,' Frederick says, arching one perfectly groomed eyebrow.

Alana chews her tongue, choosing not to rise to the bait.

'I've always enjoyed the word "defenestration",' she muses, gazing up at the ceiling tiles high above her. 'Now, I get to use it in casual conversation.'

'How many bones did you break?' Frederick asks, softly awed by the strength of the woman before him.

Alana's lips twitch into the glimmer of a smirk.

'You say that like *I* broke them.'

‘You got yourself to the window, Dr Bloom,’ Frederick replies. ‘If not through it.’

‘They told me a lot of marrow got into my blood,’ Alana says, her voice cool. Dispassionate. ‘That my body underwent *severe* cellular changes.’ Her blue eyes flicker red, and Frederick’s pulse quickens. ‘And that I should expect to find myself… *different*.’

‘You’re…’ Dr Chilton draws closer, moving up the side of the bed until he can show her the bunch of flowers held loosely in one hand. ‘Well, my, my… Welcome to the ranks of Alpha, my dear.’

Alana doesn’t reply, just watches him, waiting for his next move, and eventually the red fades back to a newly formed ring of crimson around the edge of her irises.

‘I do not mean to kick you when you are down,’ Frederick lies, gazing at her with something he must imagine is sympathy, but which more closely resembles disdain. ‘I’m just reminding you how you *got* down.’

‘And who I’m down *with*,’ Alana says. Despite Frederick’s self-obsession, her mind drifts to Will. The Omega is still in an induced coma, in a highly intensive care unit of a specialist Omega hospital. Only his immediate family is permitted entry; even the FBI are having to wait before they can question him.

None of them will ever be the same.

‘We could all use a little… *group therapy* while we’re down here,’ Frederick murmurs, curious as to how Will might feel once – *if* – he ever wakes up. Knowing that he was pregnant… That Hannibal gutted and Cut him, surely killing the child…

How deliciously terrible.

Alana’s smirk is cold, cutting and all-too-knowing.

‘There’s only one “we” you’re really interested in, Frederick,’ she says, cutting through all the bullshit of his flowers and fake sympathy. ‘And that “we” isn’t really interested in *you*.’

Or capable of talking to you.

‘Will Graham could still pull through,’ Frederick replies, determined to keep closer tabs on the Omega during his journey to recovery. ‘And, when he does, he’ll need a breakthrough.’

‘Being broken was his breakthrough,’ Alana says, sighing softly.

Frederick shakes his head.

‘Being broken was *yours*.’ His heart skips a beat, eyes flashing crimson in excitement. ‘Will has not had his breakthrough, yet. He is saving *that* for Dr Lecter.’

‘It would be the best thing for their bond, really,’ Alana muses, shrewd and calculating in a way she never was before.

Frederick huffs a growl and leans down closer to her.

‘It’s only a matter of time before Will wakes up and they’re back in each other’s orbit,’ he says. ‘Shame not to have good seats… If only to support *poor Will*.’

‘That would require some manipulation,’ she says, and Frederick hums his agreement.

‘Some “English on the ball” as it were,’ he purrs, and Alana’s smile widens. Holds. Remains there as a spark of interest flares in her eyes.

Oh yes, Frederick thinks, placing the flowers on the little tray beside her bed. *She’s mine.*

Now, they just need Will to wake up.

***

Seven months later

Returning to the townhouse is hard. Harder than she’d thought it would be.

Taking a deep breath, her heart racing and palms sweaty on the handles of her wheelchair, Alana pushes herself through the entrance foyer, ignoring the dust-strewn décor until she can open the doors to the dining room.

She’d run from him, here. Fled for her life and then had it ruined. Had it *changed*.

She isn’t the same person she was that night. She isn’t even the same *caste* anymore.

When she turns her head, looking towards the kitchen, she can still see Hannibal in full Rut. The Alpha had been vicious that night; like an animal. Slamming his body against the door of the pantry, desperate to get at Jack hiding inside.

He’d shown himself as who he truly was. What he truly is.

The floor now is clear of blood. With the lights off, the shadows pool in the corners, lurking there like demons. She can almost *hear* Hannibal’s voice, whispering into her ear, slithering across her consciousness like a razor-tipped tongue.

‘You were so afraid of me the last time I saw you… Before that last time I saw you…’

Drawing closer, inch by inch, her pulse races as a boot comes into view. Scuffed toes, worn laces… It isn’t the Alpha.

It may as well be.

Will is sitting on the floor, knees to his chest and arms draped around them. His gaze is vacant, golden eyes gleaming in the low light.

He looks like a man who has suffered too much to go on, and yet doesn't have what it takes to die.

'What are *you* doing here?'

When he speaks, Will's voice is soft. Muted. He doesn't have the energy for anything more. Being here is… painful. It clogs his throat and makes the back of his neck prickle; echoes of the screaming pain he'd felt at having his crest sliced off.

'I guess I'm looking for you,' Alana says, her voice equally hushed. The house feels like a tomb, now; a mausoleum to pain and madness.

Will hums, though he doesn't move.

'That's a good guess.'

Alana frowns, unease shivering up and down her spine.

'What are *you* doing here?' she asks, red-ringed eyes dancing over her former friend's slim frame; his gentle features and curling hair.

I could have bonded you… Taken you in and sheltered you. None of this would have happened. Even as a Beta, I could have offered you that.

'Visiting old friends,' Will murmurs, and Alana's eyes once more track around the still and silent room. Her belly squirms and a bitter taste settles on her tongue.

Perhaps it's from Will. She's still getting used to her new senses, and his scent is sharp with distress.

'You're not tempted to forget?' she asks, and Will's voice catches before he says, roughly,

'I don't *want* to forget.' He sighs, as if trying to force out the tension gathering between them. 'I'm building rooms in my Memory Palace for all my friends and family.'

'A relationship with Hannibal is blackmail elevated to the level of love,' Alana warns, and Will sniffs a wry agreement.

'A mutually unspoken pact,' he says, 'to ignore the worst in one another in order to continue enjoying the best.'

There was anything good in Hannibal?

Alana doesn't voice her skepticism, but it hangs there like a whipcrack, nonetheless.

'After everything he's done,' she says, biting her tongue for a moment as she fights a scream. 'After everything he *took* from you… Can you still ignore the worst in him?'

Will doesn't move, doesn't flinch at the reminder of the stabbing. The Cutting. The baby. But, when he closes his eyes, a single tear rolls down his cheek and Alana feels like a

monster for reminding him of what happened.

Even if it *is* for his own good.

‘I came here to be alone, Alana.’ The Omega’s voice is cold; his tone final. When he rolls his head to look up at her, there is a hard, flat look in his eyes and Alana knows she’ll get no further with him.

The fractured relationship they once thought they had is over. There’s no going back to the way things were.

Will isn’t just stumbling around in the darkness, anymore. He’s become one with it.

‘If you wouldn’t mind.’

Withdrawing from the room, Alana leaves him to his demons. Will waits until the click of her wheelchair rollers has faded and then turns his head.

Abigail sits beside him, dressed in the hunting gear from that night, her face splattered with blood and throat cut.

She smiles at him, gentle understanding in her eyes.

Will needs this. He needs to say goodbye to everything he lost, here. Everything he could have had and will never have again.

Sanity. Certainty. Freedom.

He’s connected to Hannibal by more than just biology. That bond may be broken, severed the moment the knife cut the nerves, but it won’t be over until at least one of them is dead.

And nobody deserves to kill Hannibal Lecter more than Will Graham.

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As soon as she can drive again, Alana accepts the offer to interview to be Mason Verger’s therapist. She follows the signs for Muskrat Farm, her new black Jeep bumping over the rough track of a service road winding up through the forest of the estate.

Pausing before a turn, she rolls her window down and scents the air, a low purr catching in her throat at the smell of sugar, jasmine and earth.

A female Omega is out riding, cantering her horse over a low bridge to jump the narrow bank up to a winding trail. Alana can feel her muscles tighten, her breath catching and eyes prickling at the urge to abandon the car and chase after her.

Omega aside, she’s one of the most attractive women she’s ever seen.

They arrive at the stables almost simultaneously. Alana slows the Jeep and parks beside a Jaguar and a Bentley stored under an overhang, almost forgetting her cane in her haste to

keep up with the mysterious young woman.

Margot Verger glances back over her shoulder, feeling Dr Bloom's hot, hungry gaze on her as she saunters into the barn. She smiles, her rouged-lips plump from the cold and blue eyes thickly golden as the Alpha's scent reaches her on the breeze. Roses and fire; raw but feminine and *richly* powerful.

Playing coy, Margot waits until Dr Bloom is in the barn doorway before turning, feigning surprise at seeing that she followed.

Alana smiles at the coquettish Omega, trying not to lean too heavily on her ebony and silver-handled walking cane.

'I'm Dr Bloom,' she says, pitching her voice low so as not to unnerve the other woman. Margot turns, her gloved hands stroking up and down another horse's head as she smiles.

'*You're* the new psychiatrist,' she purrs, inviting Alana to draw closer. The Alpha, predictably, obliges.

'I went one exit too far on the expressway,' she says, looking around with feigned embarrassment. 'Came back along the service road…' Her eyes flash crimson, perfectly matching her shade of lipstick. 'I'm not sure if this is my entrance?'

Margot blushes and smirks as she waves an inviting hand around. She has to admire the Alpha's poise.

'This *can* be your entrance,' she replies, batting her eyelashes at the other woman. 'It isn't easy to find the first time you come.' She can see that the innuendo isn't lost on the Alpha, and extends a hand to shake. 'I'm Margot Verger.'

Alana smiles, purring softly at the touch of glove against glove, feeling the warmth of Margot's skin even through the leather, and she covers it by gesturing around them.

'Bewitching beauty about this place,' she offers, watching carefully as Margot rolls her eyes and turns away.

'Yes,' the Omega agrees, falling into her bored, drawling monotone. 'Isn't there…?'

So, Alana thinks, *you dislike Muskrat Farm intensely… At least one of the rumors must be true.*

'You should see it in the spring,' Margot adds, a note of true fondness warming her voice. 'Riot of lilacs and the wind smells nothing at *all* like the stockyards and slaughterhouses one *usually* associates with the Verger name.'

'Can you please let your brother know I'm here?' Alana asks, sensing a deeper level of loathing in Margot's dislike of the meat-packing industry upon which her ancestors built their fortune.

Margot sighs and loosens the strap of her riding helmet.

‘He knows.’

He always knows everything.

They walk the rest of the way to the Mansion in a quiet only broken by the clack of Alana’s heels and cane, and the occasional sound of Margot’s riding boots on marble. Once they reach the entrance to the drawing room, however, where the terrace windows are open to reveal a mechanized wheelchair overlooking the lawns and fountain, Margot speaks again.

‘Some people have trouble talking with Mason,’ she says, glancing at the Alpha beside her. ‘So, if it bothers you, or you can’t take it, I’d be happy to answer any questions that you have.’

Alana nods and smiles.

‘Thank you,’ she murmurs, barely resisting the urge to reach out and give the Omega’s fragile wrist a comforting squeeze. She can smell the distress in Margot’s scent as easily as she read the tension in her body, and she isn’t used to the surge of Alpha protectiveness she’s read so much about.

‘Margot!’ A muffled, nasal voice calls through from the terrace, and Margot’s eyes flash bright gold at the sound of her brother’s voice. ‘You can leave us, now.’

Margot glances at Alana; at the sweet, naïve young Alpha willing to take the job of Mason Verger’s therapist.

‘If my brother offers you *chocolate*,’ she warns, arching one perfectly penciled eyebrow; ‘politely refuse.’

Alana waits until the smaller woman has left the room and then smiles, her eyes sharpening. She steps carefully down the ramp, her cane leading the way out onto the uneven ground of the terrace.

‘Good afternoon, Dr Bloom.’ Mason Verger speaks without turning the wheelchair, his scarred face pointed away from her so that all she can see is the broken edge of his jaw.

When he turns the wheelchair, using only his forefinger on a mechanized joystick, Alana gets a full view of his damaged face.

Lipless; slits for nostrils… Layers of skin reconstructed from grafts taken from his thighs and buttocks… A pair of glasses perched on the precarious bridge of a nose created from pig collagen… And bright blue eyes, all the more piercing for their perfection in such an imperfect face.

‘Good afternoon, Mr Verger.’ Alana allows her gaze to wander the damage, taking it all in without flinching.

Mason’s eyes twinkle at the challenge.

‘You know,’ he drawls, struggling to get a breath in the cold air, without his apparatus. ‘I thank *God* for what happened. It was my salvation. Have you accepted Jesus, Dr Bloom? Do you have *faith?’*

‘I was raised in a religious atmosphere, Mr Verger,’ Alana replies, her gloved hand tightening just a fraction on the silver handle of the walking stick. ‘But whatever that left me with… it’s not religion.’

‘Left me with more,’ Mason says. ‘You see, I’m *free*, Dr Bloom.’ He turns the wheelchair to look out across the lawns again. ‘I’m right with the Risen Jesus and it’s all okay now.’ He winks at her. ‘And *nobody* beats the Riz.’ His constructed lips stick for a moment but then he manages to flick his tongue between the crack and wet them enough to speak again. ‘He will rise me up and smite mine enemies, and I shall hear the lamentations of their women.’ He smirks, looking her up and down. ‘That was once *you*, I’m told.’ His smirk turns dirtier, still. ‘Dr Lecter got deeper inside *you* than he did any of us… Except for that slut, Will Graham, of course.’

He coughs, choking on saliva dribbling back down his esophagus and into his lungs. With his broken spine, he doesn’t have the strength to swallow properly and Alana watches, dispassionate, as he struggles for air.

A glob of phlegm comes back up, dribbling down Mason’s emaciated chin, and Alana sighs as if watching a toddler’s tantrum.

If Mason were to die right now, she wouldn’t be that upset. He was rude, after all.

‘Do you want me to get the nurse?’ she asks, in a bored voice. Mason struggles for a moment longer and sinks into the chair, drooping even more than normal in the straps keeping him in place.

‘No, no,’ he manages, sucking sweet air into thankfully clear lungs. ‘I’m *fine* now…’ He raises his eyebrows up at her and manages a smile. ‘It’s all okay now.’

Alana nods and steers the conversation back to topic.

‘You’re supposed to share any *relevant* information you find on Hannibal Lecter with the FBI,’ she reminds him, and Mason gives a non-comital hum. Alana’s eyes flicker red. ‘Have you always done that?’

‘Not exactly,’ Mason admits, and then he frowns at the female Alpha before him. ‘I want you to understand, Dr Bloom, that this is not a “revenge thing”. I have forgiven Dr Lecter, as our Savior forgave the Roman soldiers.’

Oh please, Alana thinks, fighting hard to roll her eyes at the Beta’s inflated sense of his own self-worth. Comparing his situation to that of Jesus Christ…

Pathetic.

Still, Mason Verger is rich and he has contacts. In that respect, and that respect only, he is powerful. And right now, Alana wants to use him.

‘Forgiveness isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, Mr Verger,’ she purrs, and she quirks an eyebrow above a smiling red mouth. ‘I don’t need religion to appreciate the idea of Old Testament revenge.’

***

Jack remembers phoning Bella.

He’d been in the pantry; bleeding out from the glass sticking from his throat, his life not just slipping through his fingers but spurting out with every beat of his frantic heart.

He’d wrapped his tie around his neck, squeezing tight to stem the flow. The pain had been fast giving way to shock; shock that would rob him of his consciousness and then his life.

Bella had answered just before the phone clicked to voicemail. By then, everything had begun to fade and he’d felt himself slipping, not even falling asleep, just…

Nothing.

He’d been nothing. Floating in emptiness; no pain, no fear, no life.

And then…

‘Jack?’ A weak voice. A ragged breath. ‘Are you *there?’*

Is he? He doesn’t know.

His eyelids are so heavy, but the need to see his precious Omega compels him to open them. It doesn’t make sense, at first; Bella is lying beside him, far enough way to know they’re not sharing a bed but close enough that he can see the flecks of amber in her golden eyes.

Close enough that she can hold his hand; a lifeline tethering him to this world. To her.

He blinks, taking a slow, deep breath as his lungs get used to working again.

‘Did I die?’ he asks, his voice rough, catching at the ripping pain in his throat. Bella sighs, her lungs whistling as she tries to take another ragged breath.

‘You did a lot of things,’ she manages, closing her eyes in exhaustion at the conversation. ‘Dying may have been among them.’ As Jack stares up at the ceiling, shocked that he’s here, that he’s still alive, Bella hums a tiny laugh. ‘For once… I’m glad you’re stubborn.’

‘What’s good for the goose,’ Jack murmurs, and Bella smiles, her lips tinged with blue.

Is good for the gander. But not with this. Not this time.

‘You’re not going into the ground with me, Jack,’ she says, frowning at him from across the gap. ‘So *stop* trying.’

Jack listens to his heart for a moment. The steady *thud… thud… thud*...

‘I was *dead*,’ he whispers, rolling his head to look at her again. ‘I *know* I was *dead*.’

How am I still here? How did I come back?

‘All that was left for me to do was *die*.’

He’d found the Ripper. Confronted him… and lost. His work was done. His career at the FBI was over.

Why did I come back?

‘I thought… if I could hear your voice,’ he mumbles, giving Bella’s cold fingers another squeeze. ‘We both wouldn’t have to die alone…’

‘I’m not afraid of dying,’ Bella gasps, wheezing for tiny snatches of air in lungs that feel like sacks of sand. ‘I’m not afraid of what it… will be like… to be dead. I’m… more curious… of any what-ifs than I am of any absolutes…’ When Jack looks at her again, she purrs softly. A high, melodic and uniquely Omegan sound. The same sound from their wedding day. From when they mated. From all those shared, intimate moments together throughout their lives. ‘*You* can do something… I can’t,’ she says. ‘You can cut out… what’s killing you.’

Your hatred. Your need for revenge. Your thirst for the hunt.

Jack listens, and the words stir something deep inside. He *can* cut it out…

He can cut Hannibal Lecter out of the world, and they can all begin to heal.

***

Frederick Chilton comes to find him after failing with Dr Bloom and Will Graham.

Jack has been in and out of the office for the better part of the last year. There’s the investigation into his misconduct, the search of Dr Lecter’s house – and the basement of horrors revealed once the secret door in the pantry can be opened – and then the formalities of wrapping up his once-prestigious career.

Amidst the dozen loose ends to tie up, Dr Chilton arranges a meeting with him.

‘Every useful hoop our mind can jump through begins with a certain degree of attention,’ he says, once the pleasantries are done with and they each have a glass of whisky. ‘Focus,’ he adds, ‘is the most important thing any of us can do. *You…?’* Dr Chilton sighs, dismayed to see the great Jack Crawford looking so… old. ‘You are *losing* focus, Jack.’

It’s his last day, and Jack is busy packing up his final box of personal items. He tips his glass, acknowledging the words, but replies,

‘I have *refocused*.’

‘Forced retirement at the FBI?’ Frederick scoffs. ‘You fall in love with the Bureau, but it does *not* fall in love with you.’

The fiasco with Hannibal and Will… Everything that happened… Forced retirement was a kindness.

Jack rolls his eyes.

‘Behavioral Sciences doesn’t have the resources,’ he says, parroting the excuse they gave him. ‘Homeland Security is the priority now. Terrorists are more frightening than psychopaths.’

As long as the psychopaths stay quiet, anyway.

Frederick’s eyes flash red, contrasting sharply against his navy blue coat, and he sets his empty glass down on the desk.

‘Not to *me*.’

‘Really?’ Jack arches an eyebrow. ‘The first thing you did after getting *shot* in the *face* was *copyright* “Hannibal the Cannibal”.’

Tasteless.

‘A catchphrase is a trademark and protected as a form of property,’ Frederick says, unapologetic. He smirks. ‘*You* are alive because you did not pull that glass from your neck. Will *Graham* is alive because Hannibal Lecter *likes him that way*.’

‘Well,’ Jack says, sliding his last framed award into the box, ‘maybe it’s one of those relationships that *ends* after being Cut and murdering your children.’

Frederick’s eyes gleam.

‘So you *do* know about the pregnancy.’ He smirks. ‘Still, I would argue that, with these two, that’s tantamount to flirtation.’ His pulse quickens and he steps around the desk, his scent sharpening in anticipation of the hunt. ‘Will is going to lead you *right* to him.’

‘Oh, no, he’s not,’ Jack replies, giving him a warning smile at the closeness. ‘Not to *me*. I’ve let them both go.’ He locks eyes with Chilton, holding his gaze with unwavering focus as he adds, pointedly, ‘I’ve let it *all* go.’

I’m done. I’m done with psychopaths and twisted Bonds and children bearing Hannibal Lecter’s face.

Frederick narrows his eyes at the callous, cold-hearted Alpha before him.

‘You dangle Will Graham and now you cut bait?’ As much as he’d hate to admit it, he is protective over the Omega. Will’s been through so much… To abandon him now would be

cruel. ‘You’re letting Hannibal have him; hook, line and sinker.’

Jack considers him for a moment longer, giving nothing away in his expression, and then he smiles coldly.

‘You’ll excuse me, Dr Chilton,’ he says, capping the whisky and adding it to the box. ‘I like to be home in the evening when my mate wakes.’

And, just like that, their impromptu meeting is over. Jack picks up his box, strides from the room and flicks off the lights just to hammer home the point that they are through.

Standing alone in the gloom of the empty office, Frederick releases a low, frustrated snarl. Dr Bloom is in place, yes, but without a way of tracking Will, he’ll never get Hannibal Lecter into his asylum.

Jack is lying… He has to be lying… Surely?

***

You’re not following me into the ground, Jack.

When Bella’s breathing falters for the second day in a row, he knows it’s time.

Marking his place in his Italian phrasebook, Jack rises to heavy feet and crosses the still and silent bedroom. Bella’s chest barely rises now; she’s too weak, too exhausted as her body fights for the breath is desperately needs.

She hasn’t woken since yesterday. Her curls fan across the pillow; her cold hands sit atop the covers and her scent is a swirling mix of sweetness laced with the bitter tang of pain.

I love you so much, Jack thinks, sinking onto the mattress bedside her, holding her hand carefully between his own palms before stroking up and down her arm.

The ragged little breaths sound as painful as they must feel. They catch, wheeze, rasp. Crackle in lungs weighed down by tumors.

I’ll remember you as you were. I promise.

Jack touches the wedding ring. Kisses soft, moisturized knuckles, sucking his Omega’s scent as deep into his lungs as he can.

He’ll never get another chance after this.

Now. It has to be now. Before he loses his nerve.

Jack goes to the medicine cabinet, where rows and rows of little morphine bottles sit waiting to be used. He checks Bella’s chart, where her last dose – barely an hour ago – is written in his own, neat hand.

I love you, Bella.

Opening a new syringe, he takes the morphine and the needle to the bedside. Glances down, one last time, and sees Bella struggle to take another faltering, useless breath.

It's alright, my love. I'm with you.

Piercing the foil lid of the morphine bottle, Jack withdraws just enough morphine to ease Bella's suffering. He injects it into the IV bag and watches as the clear liquid mixes with the saline.

With each drip of liquid into Bella's veins, she'll finally be free.

He sits with her as it happens. Cradles her head close to his chest and strokes her hair, purring to reassure her that she's not alone. That she's safe.

I'm right here, baby. I'm right here with you. Until the end.

She won't die alone.

***

The bedroom is too big when she's gone. The covers are made, the pillows plumped and the bedside clear of creams and medicines.

It's too quiet without the blip of the heart monitor. He hadn't realized how comforting it had been until its absence screams in the silence.

'Jack?'

Bella's voice tugs at him. Makes him raise wet eyes from the bed. His beloved Omega, his *everything*, is standing by the window, as healthy and full of vitality as the day they met. Bella smiles at him, holding up a white satin dress.

Jack manages a smile, even as tears roll down his cheeks and his throat aches.

'God,' he manages, 'I love you in white.'

Bella had worn white for him almost every day after their wedding. Even if it was just lingerie; a frothy bra or a pair of lace panties… Anything for her Alpha.

She was the strongest, kindest woman I've ever known.

'Jack?'

It's not Bella, but Alana Bloom. She holds up the dress; one of several draped carefully across a chair. They need to choose an outfit to cremate Bella in. A fist of ice closes around Jack's heart and pain stabs him at the core.

I love you in white…

He nods. Fights to find the strength to speak.

‘She’ll look beautiful,’ he manages, and then he moves to the window, staring down at the cherry blossoms lining the street outside. ‘Bella’s dead,’ he says, as if somehow saying it, again and again, will make it real. Make it feel… different. ‘That should change the view from these windows.’ His eyes flash red. ‘It’s not *right* if the *view* stays the same.’

I can’t stay here… I can’t be here, surrounded by memories of her… Memories of my failure.

‘It’s not right.’

***

The Omegas who dress her are precise. Perfect in the way they dress her and apply makeup. She looks like she could be sleeping, if not for the unnatural stillness of her body. No twitches. No breathing. No signs of life, however small.

Jack remembers the first time they held a ceremony here in this church. Their wedding day. Bella had looked radiant in her white gown sewn with pearls and crystals, her hair held up with her grandmother’s pin and her hands clasped around a bouquet of flowers.

It had been her father’s wish to see them married, officially, even years after they had been mated. General Crowe had wanted to see his daughter walk down the aisle, to be claimed by the Alpha she loved before God and men.

Now, Jack leans down and places a lingering kiss on Bella’s cool forehead as she rests in the coffin before the altar.

The church will be busy, soon enough. For now, he has her to himself. One last time.

Candles burn at the end of each pew. Flowers adorn the coffin, many of them from friends and loved ones.

A distinctive copperplate catches Jack’s gaze and hot bile scratches his throat. Here? Now? Hannibal Lecter has the fucking nerve to –

Snarling under his breath, Jack takes a moment to compose himself before plucking the heavy parchment envelope from the bouquet of scabious, begonia, blue and white roses, amaryllis and alstroemeria.

Beautiful wife, devoted partner, dearly loved and forever missed. The message is clear, and the flowers are tied with a black silk ribbon. There’s no tag; no trademark. As he turns from Bella, shielding her from the filth of Dr Lecter’s note of condolence, Jack can’t help but shiver and look around the quiet, empty church.

How did he know she had died? How did he know I would be here?

He opens it slowly, half-expecting poison or some other devilish thing to come slithering from the envelope. When it doesn’t, he reads the words written on the page.

“O wrangling schools, that search what fire

Shall burn this world, had none the wit

Unto this knowledge to aspire,

That this her feaver might be it?”

Underneath the extract of poem is a single line.

I’m so sorry about Bella, Jack.

Hatred takes his knees out from under him. The strength of his revulsion shocks him and Jack sinks to the front pew, breathing slowly and carefully so as not to be sick.

Hannibal has tainted this moment. The cruelty of his actions is breathtaking.

Another scent drifts on the air. It soothes some of the sting of Hannibal’s sadism.

Will Graham quietly takes a seat behind his former boss, golden eyes shielded behind tinted glasses, wearing his formal suit and a dark tie.

‘I opened my eyes this morning,’ Jack says, still holding the letter from Hannibal, feeling that, if he puts it down, it might grow legs and skitter across the floor to attack his beloved Bella. ‘And, at *that* moment, before the weight of the day came for me, I didn’t even *think* about Bella dying…’ He sighs. ‘I still think she was hoping to die while I was out of the room. But… I was there when her heart stopped. And I held onto her… until her brain died.’

‘I hope she’s… somewhere today, Jack.’ Will’s voice, when he speaks, is muted. Hoarse with the grief he can’t help but feel from the other man. Jack’s loss isn’t just a wound; it’s a gaping abyss where his whole world used to be. ‘And that she’s comfortable.’

Jack nods, another tear slipping down his grizzled cheek.

‘I hope she can see in my heart,’ he whispers, but then he has to pause. Has to gather his strength again. ‘She had to die on me… I knew it was coming, but it still smarts.’

The loss. I lost Bella, and I hate losing.

He sets his jaw.

‘I know what’s coming for you, Will. You don’t have to die on me, too.’

He gets up and hands Will the envelope. Buttons his suit jacket back up and smooths out his tie.

He has guests to greet, and in-laws to care for on this day of mourning.

God only knows what Will might make of the poem. He can’t afford to care, right now. He has his own Omega to focus on.

***

‘Ow… *Ow*…’

Strong, thick fingers push the gel of the mask into fragile skin, sending razor-sharp pain searing through Mason Verger’s face. He glares up through wet eyes at the Beta standing over him, hating the coldly amused smirk on the male nurse’s face.

The mask is peeled off, cool air like a slap to his cheeks, and then the fingers are back, pushing and kneading, agony ricocheting through his skull until he wants to scream.

‘I said, *OW!’*

‘Blood is flowing,’ Cordell replies, ignoring his employer’s protests and continuing to massage the reconstructed tissue. ‘Nerves are intact. Pain is a good thing.’

‘This is why you could never legally work in the health industry, Cordell,’ Mason grumbles, his fingers spasming at the torture. ‘They were gonna throw you away. You would have been *wasted… OW!’*

‘Scar tissue,’ Cordell says, pressing again on screaming cheekbones, ‘is an awesome demonstration of self-preservation. The flesh’s fight to exist, down to the most basic *cell*, is a wonder.’

As he steps away, Mason uses the joystick on the wheelchair to move from a horizontal back to near-sitting position.

‘At Communions around the earth,’ he says, reveling in the rush of dizziness such rapid movement brings him, ‘the devout belief that, through the miracle of transubstantiation, they eat the flesh and blood of Christ.’

Cordell slides Mason’s glasses back onto his face, allowing him to see the room more clearly.

‘It is an impressive ceremony,’ he agrees, wiping his hands off on a towel. Mason hums.

‘I need to prepare an even *more* impressive ceremony,’ he says, thinking of his own god. ‘With no transubstantiation necessary.’

The larger Beta rubbed massage oil between his wide palms and bent down to rub it into Mason’s wasted legs, caring for his weak, vulnerable skin.

‘Cordell,’ Mason says, only aware of the nurse’s actions by his line of sight, having no feeling from his jaw down. ‘I have known you to be absolutely reliable and capable of almost anything. Is that true?’

‘It is not *untrue*,’ Cordell agrees, his eyes gleaming.

‘I pay you a large salary to be responsible for my care and feeding,’ Mason says, and Cordell replies without lifting his gaze from the skinny legs.

‘And *all* that that entails.’

‘And all that that entails,’ Mason agrees. He wets his new, oddly smooth lips. ‘I would like you to begin arrangements for Dr Hannibal Lecter to be eaten alive.’

Cordell doesn’t falter. Doesn’t even pause in his ministrations, but there’s an excitement to his stance; an eager tension to his shoulders.

‘Do you have a preference for how you would like him prepared?’ he asks, smirking up through his lashes when Mason hums a purr.

‘Oh, *Cordell…’* Mason’s eyes sparkle. ‘If I had lips, I would *smile*.’

***

Six months after Dr Bloom’s initial meeting with Mason Verger and they are no closer to catching Dr Hannibal Lecter.

‘All this time he eludes us,’ Mason says, propped up in his wheelchair so he can meet the Alpha’s red-ringed eyes with his own. ‘Got away clean. It’s as though Hannibal Lecter has dropped off the earth.’

Alana paces as she thinks, wearing a pristine Prada suit, courtesy of her new, lavish salary. She still uses the walking cane, but the need gets less with every passing month.

‘Hannibal obviously has good papers,’ she says. ‘And money. Europe is where a man of his tastes would settle.’

‘His tastes are *very* specific,’ Mason says, eyeing her up and down again. Without rising to the bait, Alana merely gives him a cold, sharp smile.

‘And *that’s* how you’ll find him,’ she says, piquing Mason’s interest. She steps closer, looking down at him as she draws level with his wheelchair. ‘The wine. The truffles… Taste in all things will be a constant between Dr Lecter’s lives. His *name* will change, but his taste will *not*.’

His arrogance will be his downfall, wherever he is.

‘Of course…’ Mason shifts his head; the closest thing to a nod he can manage. ‘*You* know what he would favor… Tell me, Dr Bloom; does he favor *you?’*

Alana smirks.

‘I think I *amused* him. Things either amuse him or they don’t…’ She looks him up and down in return. ‘And if they *don’t*… Well, *you* didn’t.’

Mason’s eyes glint at the insult.

‘Do you feel he ever genuinely cared for you?’ he asks, and Alana huffs as she turns away.

‘I have no *idea* how Dr Lecter genuinely feels about me,’ she replies. ‘Last time we spoke, he promised he’d kill me.’

‘Huh…’ Mason uses the joystick to move the wheelchair closer to the net curtains overlooking the gardens. ‘How does it feel to use understanding as a predator’s tool?’

Alana quirks an eyebrow at him.

‘I’m using it as I’ve always used it,’ she says. ‘A psychiatric tool.’

Mason narrows his eyes and uses the stick to raise his chair up further.

‘Why not take this to Jack Crawford?’ he asks, and Alana rolls her eyes.

‘Jack’s done at the FBI. A footnote in his own Evil Minds Museum.’

‘I remain curious, Dr Bloom…’ Mason wheels closer, inch by inch. ‘How I have found you in *my* pocket. Do tell. I’m all ears.’ He sucks in a breath, unable to laugh but wanting to. ‘They’ve just been… redistributed.’

Alana holds his gaze, bold and unflinching.

‘You’re preparing the theatre of Hannibal’s death,’ she replies. ‘I’m just doing my part to… get him to the stage.’

And ensuring I have a front row seat for the final performance.

***

After three unanswered calls and two ignored voicemails, Jack drives out to Wolf Trap. He doesn’t want Will to do what he fears he’s going to do.

It’s not worth it. Please, don’t go after him. It’s not worth your life.

His heart sinks when he parks up behind a snow-covered pickup. Will’s Volvo is nowhere to be seen, but the lights are on in the farmhouse. As he climbs out into the snow, he can hear dogs barking.

He climbs out of his SUV and climbs the side steps to the porch. Before he can reach the front door, it opens from inside and the dogs run out, barking and whining in excitement at another chance to play in the snow.

Bill Graham stands on the threshold, holding a sleeping Daniel in one arm.

‘Mr Graham,’ Jack says, tipping his hat to the Beta. ‘I’m sorry to intrude on you at this hour…’ He reads nothing from the Beta’s face; features so similar to Will’s and yet so closed off. ‘Is Will home?’ he tries, hoping for a gentle tone.

Bill’s greying eyebrows draw into a deeper scowl, furrowing his forehead with worry.

‘He’s already gone,’ he says, shoulders sagging with regret. ‘Figure he took the boat this mornin’… Had packed up an’ left before we’d even woke. Dogs never made a peep.’

‘I see…’ Jack sighs, watching his breath rise up in a cloud before being whisked away by the frigid breeze. ‘Did he say anything before he left? Was he… alright?’

Bill hugs Danny closer to him, tucking the comforter around him to protect little cheeks against the cold.

‘Will knows what he’s gotta do,’ he says, speaking softly into the head of curls. ‘He knows how to do right by these little ‘uns.’ Glancing up, he locks eyes with the Alpha. ‘Do you?’

Will you protect my son? Will you do whatever it takes?

Jack nods, slowly and carefully, binding himself in the promise of protection.

‘I do.’

Bill extends a hand to shake, and pulls Jack a step closer when they do.

‘Bring him home,’ he growls, eyes damp as he stares into Jack’s face. ‘Please. Don’t make me raise these pups without their papa.’

Jack covers Bill’s hand with his other one, strengthening the pact.

‘I’ll do everything I can,’ he says, his irises prickling as they flood crimson. ‘I promise.’

***

He feels like shit for leaving, but he has to. He can’t explain it; it’s this itch inside him. A buzzing, nagging need to find Hannibal. To be with him.

To *end* things, one way or another.

‘I’ll come back for you,’ he whispers, staring down at the twins asleep in their cribs. They’re upstairs, with his Pops, but Will still sleeps in the camp bed near the lounge. He likes to keep an eye on the door; to guard them at night.

‘Your Granddaddy’s gonna take you to Louisiana,’ he murmurs, his chest aching at the idea of leaving his little ones behind.

He may never see them again.

‘Just for a little while…’ His breath hitches on a sob and he has to catch the tears before they fall. ‘I promise; I’ll come back if I can. As soon as I can.’

He drives out to the marina in the dark of night and is weighing anchor as dawn breaks. The engine is new, the sails are mended and the hull has been freshly painted.

Sailing is the best way to avoid border police, passports and checks and the inevitable FBI or Homeland Security questioning. Besides, this way he can cruise straight into a marina in Palermo, and make his first stop at the Norman Chapel; the foyer of his Alpha’s memory palace.

I'm coming for you, Hannibal, he thinks, tilting his face to the breeze and breathing deep the ocean smells. *And when I find you, you're going to pay for what you've done*

Contorno

Chapter Summary

As Will and Chiyoh travel to Italy, Jack Crawford arrives in Florence. Alana helps Mason Verger confirm Hannibal's location and Hannibal kills Inspector Pazzi.

Chiyoh acts to protect her Alpha.

Chapter Notes

Hey peeps! So this has felt like a right slog at times and then a real joy-fest at others. It's been a really tough few months, what with the c-word and everything making life crazy. We've been ill, we've had a bereavement and it's all been a bit bonkers!

However, there is FINALLY another update on this story, so I really hope you enjoy. I promise, no matter what, I'm continuing with all my fanfics, just really, REALLY slowly. Sorry.

Stay safe, everyone, and look after each other. <3

FIVE

Contorno

'On still evenings, when the air was damp after a rain, we played a game.'

Chiyoh's voice, soft and careful, hangs in the cool twilight air between them and Will finds himself drawn to the golden ring around her brown irises, thick and gleaming in the gathering dark.

'Hannibal would burn all kinds of barks and incense,' the young Omega says, recalling her childhood with the enigmatic, dangerous Alpha. 'For me to identify by scent alone.'

The cross-Europe train pulls them through fields of livestock, past windfarms and housing estates and factories. One of the few remaining steam trains to make such an epic journey, it consumes over thirty-thousand tons of coal each year and runs every day but Sunday. Will and Chiyoh sit in their own carriage, facing each other before a curtained window as night falls over the fields outside.

They left Minsk two days ago, and will arrive in Florence by tomorrow evening. Will has messaged his Pops, asking for a picture of the twins, but he won't have enough cell signal now until they pull into the station for him to check for a reply. The thought makes his chest uncomfortably tight but there's nothing he can do about it, so he forces himself to focus on the present.

'He was charming,' Chiyoh adds, her gaze distant as she stares from the window. 'The way a cub is charming…' A small, cold smile, eyes glinting. 'A small cub that grows up to be like one of the big cats.'

Will mimics the smile, his own eyes flashing gold.

'One you can't play with later.'

Chiyoh nods and sits back, retreating into shadow.

'The day I met Hannibal,' she says, 'he was an orphan. I was meant to meet him with his sister, but he was alone.'

Will frowns, curious.

'How did you meet him?' he asks, his chest tightening and pulse quickening at the thought of young Hannibal Lecter; damaged, vulnerable and alone, driven mad by the horrors of what a pack of rapid Alphas did to him and his sister.

Why do I still care so much about him? After everything he's done to me?

'I was his Aunt's attendant,' Chiyoh replies, distracting herself from the pain on Will's face by fiddling with the velvet curtains at the train window. 'It's an old tradition in my culture, for Omegas of a certain station to learn from others. My parents sent me to learn from Lady Murasaki when I was just a girl.' She lowers her gaze, something sharp and knowing in her tone when she adds, 'I learned from Hannibal, too.'

'He comes in the guise of a mentor,' Will agrees, remembering his own introduction to the enigmatic, devious Alpha. 'But it's *distress* that excites him.'

Chiyoh glares at him.

'I'm not in distress,' she growls, and Will smiles dryly.

'Not anymore.' At Chiyoh's blush, her golden eyes lowered in submission, he adds softly, 'You had a strict rule about taking life. And you broke it.'

I made you break it. With barely a push.

He frowns, curious as to her emotional state. He imagines this is what Hannibal feels; mild amusement and a desire to know, to understand someone else even at their expense.

'Is it on your mind?' he asks, watching her carefully, waiting for the serene mask to slip. 'Do you see yourself killing him, over and over?'

Chiyoh stares out of the window, the gold ring in her irises flaring and then fading to a dull copper.

‘No.’ She looks at him. ‘I see *you*.’ At Will’s smile – cold and cruel and *just* like his Alpha’s – she tilts her own head. ‘How do you know Hannibal’s in Florence?’

Will pulls something from the breast pocket of his suit jacket. He leans forward, holding it out for her to see.

‘Botticelli.’

It’s a postcard; a beautiful piece of Renaissance artwork on the front. The *Primavera*, with dancing nymphs and a woman with flowers streaming from her mouth. Chiyoh looks down at it, admiring the brush strokes carefully replicated on card.

‘I’ve never been to Italy,’ she admits. She turns the card over and looks at the insignia on the back. *Galleria Degli Uffizi.* The Uffizi Gallery. Where the Primavera has hung for decades. ‘I never expected to.’

With a sigh, she turns her gaze back to the window. A flock of starlings swirling high over the telephone wires reminds her of an old fact; learned long ago.

‘Birds eat thousands of snails every day,’ she murmurs, thinking back to the Alpha in the cellar of the old Lecter estate. ‘Some of those snails survive digestion, and they emerge to find they’ve travelled the world.’

‘In the belly of the beast,’ Will says, smiling sadly at her.

Will we survive digestion? Or are we already ghosts?

***

Lips meet. Press. Part. Hands rove, squeezing muscles and tracing silver scars. Nails scratch lightly over stiffening nipples and teeth graze tender buds before tongues rasp and suckle.

Will straddles Hannibal’s lap, the burgundy covers of their bed pooled around them as they move. The ceiling overhead is painted in a fresco of cherubs and devils, each creature blending into the other; an eternal battle between Heaven and Hell.

‘Is this real?’ Hannibal whispers, holding Will close as they kiss again. He slides his fingers through his mate’s thick curls, holding him steady as he plunders the eager, willing mouth, trying to drink down every drop of Will’s spit. Anything to fill the emptiness inside him. ‘Are you here with me?’

‘I’m coming,’ Will breathes, trailing damp affections along Hannibal’s stubbled cheek, kissing away the tears falling from his Alpha’s eyes. ‘We’re dreaming, but we’re together.’

‘I thought I’d killed you,’ Hannibal says, his heart aching even as arousal licks down his spine to pool at urgent heat in his groin. ‘That night –’

‘Sssh.’ Will kisses him silent, stroking back silky blond hair and cupping each side of his mate’s face. ‘You never intended to kill me.’

‘I wanted to hurt you,’ Hannibal replies, and Will leans back so they can both see the smile across his abdomen. ‘More than you hurt me.’

‘You can’t cope with these emotions,’ Will says, rolling his hips and moaning softly at the feel of an erection against his own. ‘You never cared about anyone since Mischa.’

‘I’d do anything for you, Will.’ Hannibal gazes into his eyes as he speaks. He presses closer, their chests flush together, lips brushing and arms tight around each other’s shoulders. ‘*Anything* to make you strong.’

‘You have a twisted way of showing affection,’ Will whispers, and he bites deep into Hannibal’s throat. The force of his attack knocks Hannibal onto his back, the mattress sinking under the change in weight. Will locks his jaw, his teeth piercing the skin and filling his mouth with blood. As he sucks a bruise of ownership over the Alpha’s thundering pulse, he reaches down between them and takes hold of Hannibal’s hardness. He can smell his own slick; sweet and smoky, like a summer wildfire, and he doesn’t hesitate as he guides the erection behind his own, rocking down onto the length as Hannibal thrusts up.

They join in one smooth, sharp motion. Will shudders, aching at the sudden stretch, and bites down harder at the invasion. Hannibal whimpers beneath him, arching his spine and tipping his head back to bare more of his throat. Will barely allows a moment to pass before he starts to move, riding Hannibal to spark a pleasure that he’s missed for far too long.

We belong together. No matter what.

They move in perfect synchronicity, connected by teeth and flesh as much as by their minds. The room in their Memory Palace shimmers around them; white drapes darkening to maroon, the window overlooking Wolf Trap but the furniture similar to that of the townhouse.

This is our place. Not yours. Not mine. Ours.

Wrenching back from the ring of bloody, bruised teeth-marks, Will bares his fangs at Hannibal and lets some of the red drip from his lips. The moment it lands on the other man’s mouth, his eyes blaze crimson and a guttural snarl erupts from his throat.

Hannibal surges upright. He twists, pinning Will on his back beneath him. Will whines, urging him on, and wraps his legs tight around his waist, pulling him impossibly closer. Deeper.

‘Mine,’ Hannibal growls, rutting into him until Will’s eyes are wet. Until his brow is damp with sweat and his breathing is erratic, catching on groans and whimpers of pleasure. ‘Say it!’

‘Yours,’ Will promises, his voice cracking as a climax crashes through him. He convulses, every muscle tightening, clenching down around the knot swelling inside him as Hannibal thrusts two, three more times and then follows with a powerful orgasm of his own.

This, he thinks, floating on bliss, riding the high with every judder and spark wrung from his singing nerves, feeling so utterly connected to Hannibal that there is no boundary between them. *This is where I belong. With my Alpha. My mate.*

'This is only a dream,' Hannibal murmurs, hugging him close as the last of the shockwaves fade, leaving them spent and sated. 'We're not really here.'

'I will be,' Will says, nuzzling the bitemark and then scenting Hannibal with a purr. 'A day. Two at most. We'll be together, again.'

They drift in nothingness for a while, content to lie together, their bodies sealed with a knot, hands gentle now in their roaming, lips meeting in placid kisses. After a while, after their hearts have slowed and the sweat has dried from their bodies, they part and rise from the warm bed.

'Hungry?' Hannibal asks, smiling at the twinge of pain in his neck when he turns his head. Will smiles at him, blue eyes flashing gold at the danger in those words.

'Always.'

He pulls on a pair of pyjama pants and wraps a silk robe around him. Hannibal covers himself with sweatpants and goes to prepare a snack. The dream has shifted again, interspersing imagination with reality. Will can see only darkness beyond the window of the Florentine apartment; there should be the piazza but there is a sense of open fields and stars moving past at a great pace – the same view as from the train.

Hannibal moves behind him, adding the finishing touches to a silver platter of escargot. Will can smell the unique, tangy scent of cooked snails mingled with garlic and lemon, and his mouth waters.

'Your childhood home is beautiful,' he murmurs, thinking back to the invertebrates covering the angel statue and courtyard of the Lecter estate. 'I had Chiyoh kill the Alpha, and then I turned him into an effigy.'

'What did you make?' Hannibal asks, his voice carrying the same note of genuine curiosity that he reserves only for Will.

'An *imago*,' Will admits, hand absently rubbing the line of his caesarean scar where his robe has parted. 'A firefly.'

'I kept cochlear gardens as a young man to attract fireflies,' Hannibal replies, pouring them each a glass of Cognac to accompany the escargot. 'Their larvae would devour many times their own body weight in snails. Fuel,' he adds, approaching Will from behind and setting the platter down on the table between them. 'To power transformation into a delicate creature of such beauty.'

Flirt, Will thinks, leaning in with a knowing smile to accept a mouthful of skewered, grilled snail. Hannibal purrs, just once, long and low, as Will chews the morsel, and they share the same thought.

I'm devouring snails, just as I devoured your teaching to transform into the creature you wanted me to be. The killer you craved.

He takes a crystal tumbler and holds it up in a toast.

'To the misfortune of the snail.'

'Snails follow their nature as surely as those that eat them,' Hannibal says, sipping his own brandy to mix the flavors on his tongue. He comes to stand close behind his Omega, trailing his fingers through the curls at the nape of his neck. Will dips his head forward, baring the scarred nape of his neck, a low purr escaping his throat.

'Fireflies live very brief lives,' he whispers, his vision shimmering with tears as love and fear constrict his heart in a vice.

If I finish my transformation, I'll die.

Hannibal hums, considering it, but then says,

'Better to live true to yourself for an instant than never know it.'

Will leans back against Hannibal's chest, allowing the other man to support his weight. Hannibal presses his fingers to the smooth side of Will's neck, checking his pulse, and Will wonders how dark the bruise on his throat has become.

'Not like I do,' he says, glancing back up at the other man. 'According to you, I've been fighting my true self all my life.'

'An insect lacks morality to agonize over,' Hannibal says, shrugging around another sip of Cognac. 'You agonize about inevitable change.'

Will hums.

'Almost anything can be trained to resist its instinct,' he murmurs, reminding Hannibal of his iron-clad self-control. 'A shepherd dog doesn't savage the sheep.'

Hannibal chuckles, and leans down to scent Will's hair with a smile. He lowers his arm from stroking his throat and hugs him across the waist, instead, trailing kisses across his cheek.

'But it wants to,' he whispers, lips brushing the shell of his ear. A soft sigh makes them both shiver and Will feels his nerves draw tight as his Alpha continues, 'You have reached a state of moral dumbfounding. Empathy and reciprocity.'

Love and hate. Understanding and a thirst for righteous justice.

'Reciprocity…' Will hums thoughtfully. 'If we keep track of incoming and outgoing intentions, then *I* am en-route to kill *you*… while *you* lie in wait to kill *me*.' He takes a sip of his drink. 'Now *that's* reciprocity.'

That's the only path our relationship can take.

***

The city of Florence is just as beautiful as when he first saw it, but, as Jack looks out across the river, he realizes how hollow it now feels. How empty.

The world will never be the same, now that his Bella is gone.

He carries her urn across the *Ponte Santa Trinita*; the same bridge on which they first met, all those years ago. Other Florentines and tourists walk around him; sightseeing or on their way to early morning jobs. The sun is sill low in sky; the salty smell of dawn still lingering in the sleep-heavy air.

Jack lowers his head and places a reverent kiss on the lid of the urn, scenting the engraved wood and, very faintly, the remains of his Omegan mate inside.

'Ciao, Bella,' he murmurs, tears pricking his eyes as he unscrews the cap and prepares to let her go from this life.

He remembers the first time he saw her. He'd been a bullheaded, macho Alpha, strutting along the riverbank with his companions after lunch in a nearby bistro. The midday sun had been beating down on them, heating the paving to blister his soles, but an ice-cold beer in his hands made the world a truly pleasurable place to be, and the air was rich with the smells of other Alphas and Omegas, coffee and sweet pastries.

'Bella! Bella!'

A pack of young Naval officers were wolf-whistling at an Omega standing on the bridge. Jack remembers looking over, blinking against the light, and seeing the most beautiful woman in his life. Curling hair knotted at the nape of her neck, dressed in the pale blue Omegan uniform of the Royal Marines – during the more liberal time when Omegas were permitted to serve as intelligence staff in the Armed Forces – with perfect skin and stunning gold eyes.

The Italian Alphas in her unit were flirting with her; harmless banter that made her smile and twirl for them. To Jack, it was a display of her strength that she was not intimidated by them. This was a woman who could hold her own; who could, no doubt, beat an Alpha down if they tried anything untoward.

He fell in lust with her that day, and, after one hour in her company, love was quick to follow.

A tear rolls down his cheek at the memory. Jack holds the lid of the urn close to his chest, his heart ripping in two, and tips Bella's ashes out over the edge of the bridge. The breeze catches them, lifting them in a swirl before scattering them across the glistening surface of the River Arno.

My beautiful one. My mate. My everything.

His ring is next. The metal slips from his finger, too easy for his liking. A reminder of the weight he's lost, following the attack and mourning Bella's passing. A reminder of the *life*

he's lost.

He feels the weight of it in his palm. Tosses and catches it, two, three times. Then, with a burst of strength, fueled by rage at the universe stealing his beloved Bella, he hurls it into the river.

The ring hits the surface of the water with a splash, twisting and turning as it sinks. It takes with it the last of Jack's hope, the last of his love and the last of his honor.

He will do whatever it takes, now, to kill Hannibal Lecter. And, if it kills him, so be it.

***

Inspector Pazzi meets him at the *Questura di Firenze* later that day. Jack is pleasantly surprised by how well he is treated by his colleagues, though Rinaldo later tells him that he is held in low regard because of his Omegan status and failure to correctly apprehend *Il Mostro* in his youth.

'It is true,' he says, guiding the Alpha to a window table in a small café bar near the office; 'Omegan rights are better here than in your America.' He grimaces, his eyes flashing gold. 'That does not mean all is well, however. To many of my colleagues I am an oddity; a token Omegan officer to keep the Federation satisfied.'

'I'm sorry, my friend,' Jack says, sipping espresso. 'I hope the world changes for the better, soon.'

'I count myself fortunate,' Rinaldo replies, raising his cup in a toast. 'Your Will Graham, for example, could well have been sentenced to prison for his role within the FBI. At least I have a job, and a beautiful mate who allows me to thrive.'

'To Omegan Liberation,' Jack says, and they clink their cups together in salute.

After their coffees are finished, and Rinaldo has enjoyed a cigarette outside in the evening sun, they travel to a well-kept house in the outskirts of town. Rinaldo's mate greets them at the door, her eyes flashing protective red before calming to brown. She gives Jack Crawford a hug, inviting him into her home and her pack, and scents Rinaldo before allowing him to leave her side.

They share the task of hosting – Rinaldo prepares dessert whilst Allegra cooks, and he opens wine for them all to share.

'*Grazie*,' Jack says, humming his pleasure at the smell of the Chianti. Allegra clinks her glass against his, then against Rinaldo's, who beams with joy at serving two Alphas so well.

Allegra smiles at him, keen to know more about the former Head of the Behavioral Sciences Unit her mate talks about so much.

'You've recently stopped wearing your wedding ring,' she says, nodding to the pale band of skin on his finger. Jack grimaces at being caught out and nods to her own; bright and untarnished with age.

‘Yes, and you’ve recently *started* wearing yours,’ he replies, receiving a coy smile from the other Alpha.

‘I have an eternally young and lovely wife,’ Rinaldo purrs, dipping his head to kiss her when Allegra cups the back of his neck and brings him down for affection. Jack respectfully lowers his gaze, allowing them a moment of privacy, and Allegra revels in it before turning back to her guest.

‘Not so young,’ she confesses. ‘My family has many Alphas and we all age well. Rinaldo and I have been mated for many years, but only recently did we marry before the eyes of God.’ She nods again to his ring. ‘Separated?’

‘No,’ Jack replies, a moment of sadness like a knife in the heart. ‘Widowed. I met her here…’ He swallows, his throat tight. ‘It’s a little strange to be in Italy without her. We came here almost every year for our anniversary.’

‘*Mi dispiace*,’ Allegra says, mortified to have upset or offended him. ‘The loss of a mate is a terrible tragedy.’ She places a comforting hand on his arm and squeezes. ‘Tell me; what was her name?’

‘Bella.’ Jack smiles, and Allegra raises her glass in a toast.

‘To Bella,’ she says, and they salute the passed Omega with a moment of silence and a solemn sip of wine. Allegra gives Jack’s arm another touch, kisses Rinaldo’s cheek and returns to the kitchen to dish up.

Rinaldo stares after her, his cheeks warm and scent syrupy thick with love.

‘I look at her,’ he murmurs, ‘and I think about all the things I want to do for her… All the things I want to give her.’

‘How you wish to appear in her eyes,’ Jack says, pulling out a chair and sitting at the table. ‘Are you planning on having children?’

‘Certainly not in my present role at the *Questura*,’ Rinaldo replies, taking the chair at the head of the table, where he can sit between his Alpha and his guest. ‘I perform menial errands found for me by my former subordinates. Tasks “befitting my caste”.’ They share a knowing look and Rinaldo sniffs in disgust. ‘Writing up interviews from missing person cases…’ His eyes flash gold. ‘They’ve enjoyed my fall from grace.’

Pouring them each more wine to wash away the bitter taste of regret, Jack gives voice to his realization.

‘You weren’t in Palermo on official business.’

Rinaldo grins, unashamed to be caught out. He gestures to the other man with his glass.

‘Neither were you.’

Jack shrugs, taking a sip of wine as he considers his response. In the end, honesty is the best policy, though he does lower his voice so as not to let it carry back to the kitchen where Allegra might worry.

‘And your subordinates at the *Questura*… do they know you’re investigating Hannibal Lecter?’

Rinaldo glances down at the plate waiting to be filled with his mate’s delicious food, his stomach rumbling at the smell of garlic and balsamic vinegar on the antipasti and insalata already on the table.

‘I’ll tell them when I *know* it’s Lecter that I’m investigating,’ he says, to which Jack chuckles and uses his fork to spear a chunk of mozzarella from the platter.

‘You already know,’ the Alpha says, placing the cheese on his plate, ready to accompany the main dish.

Rinaldo shakes his head with a sigh.

‘I need to be *certain*.’ He leans closer. ‘I am an Omega; disgraced and out of fortune…’

I cannot afford to be wrong again.

Jack nods, showing his understanding, though there’s a warning tone to his voice when he replies,

‘It has *inclined* you towards a game that’s *outside* of the law.’ He narrows his eyes and returns to the wine. ‘I know. I know that look. I played that game and I lost.’

Don’t make my mistake.

‘Let’s eat!’ Allegra announces, returning to the room carrying a wide, deep dish full of pasta. Jack sits back with a rumbling purr, welcoming her to set the bowl down between himself and Rinaldo.

‘Oh my goodness,’ he says, gazing at the glistening strips of pasta nestled around chunks of hare meat in ragù. ‘How *beautiful*.’

‘Pasta?’ Allegra says, accepting the compliment with a smile and a nod of the head. When Jack hums his confirmation, she gives him a generous portion.

‘This,’ Rinaldo says, taking the opportunity to teach Jack some more Italian, ‘*pappardelle alla lepre*. Can you say it?’

Jack chuckles and attempts the same bouncy pronunciation.

‘*Pappa-dell-ay alla lepre.’*

‘No, no.’ Rinaldo smiles and shakes his head, making Allegra laugh. ‘It’s not “papa-dell-ay”, it’s “papar-dellay”.’

'Papardelle,' Jack repeats, getting the enunciation correct this time. Rinaldo grins and nods, praising him, and then gestures to the sauce.

'That's it. With *lepre*.'

'Thank you,' Jack says, and twists a spoonful of pasta around his fork. 'What is *lepre?'*

'Hare,' Allegra replies, now serving Rinaldo before taking the bowl to her setting and scooping out a portion. 'It's my grandmother's recipe.'

'It's delicious,' Jack says, and, for a moment, he's reminded of old dinners in Baltimore; Hannibal across from him, Will beside him, a plateful of exquisite food waiting to be savored and a killer to hunt.

But that was all a lie. And this… He smiles at the easy flirting and casual touches between Rinaldo and his Alpha. *This is what real love looks like.*

***

Four and a half thousand miles away, in Maryland, Dr Alana Bloom smiles down at an extravagant assortment of fine bone-china, silver tableware and fresh flowers.

'A table setting,' she says, 'from the home of Dr Hannibal Lecter.'

Across from her, strapped into his electronic wheelchair, Mason Verger's eyes gleam. Alana purrs, just once, and dips a red-nailed hand to pick up a piece of carefully-sourced cutlery.

'The silverware is 19th-century Dutch,' she continues. 'From Christofle. The plate is Glen French china from Tiffany. The table *linen*…' She strokes the cloth as she speaks. 'Is damask cotton. Also from Christofle.'

Fag, Mason thinks, sneering at the embroidered material. Aloud, however, he drawls,

'Well, you've gotta hand it to the man; he has the most *marvelous* taste.'

He makes a mental note to order new silverware from Christofle, and a new dinner service set from Tiffany.

'I've discovered a pattern of purchases,' Alana explains. 'An echo of the life he lived in Baltimore.'

'He likes music,' Mason says, detesting the respect and admiration he has for the man who mutilated him. 'He likes wine, he likes food… And he used to like *you*.' He leers at her, his tongue flicking out to wet his lipless mouth. 'How do *you* taste, Dr Bloom? Sweet, I bet. I'm sure you got a taste of *him*, too?' He chuckles. 'Spitters are quitters, and you don't strike me as a quitter.'

Alana ignores the crude barb and merely picks up a tissue-wrapped package, continuing with her lesson.

‘The first step in the development of taste is to be willing to credit your own opinion.’ The package opens like a flower to the sun, revealing a single ripe fig. ‘But in the areas of food and wine, I have to follow Hannibal’s precedents.’

She remembers him slicing the same type of fig in his Baltimore kitchen; savoring each slice, licking juice from his fingers between strokes of the blade… Watching her watch him, smelling her arousal and basking in the attention.

Next, Alana picks up a piece of printed parchment paper.

‘A receipt,’ she says, ‘from a Florentine fine grocer; *Vera Dal 1926*, for two bottles of Bâtard-Montrachet and some *tartufi bianchi.’*

She lifts the white truffle to her nose, scenting it the way she’s seen Hannibal do a thousand times. As an Alpha, her senses are heightened; more attuned to subtle variations in flavors, and she revels in the complexity of the rare mushroom.

She tosses receipt after receipt onto the table, smirking with red-painted lips at her employer.

‘And another. And another, and another. Once a week, for the last few months, a blonde woman has been making the *exact same purchase*. And she *always* pays cash.’ Alana’s irises flare crimson; a low shiver runs through her and she distantly realizes it is the thrill of a hunt. ‘She’s shopping for Hannibal.’

Mason, having sat fairly quietly for the last part, contorts his face into a passing resemblance of a smile. The true delight, however, lies in the mad glint in his Beta-blue eyes, and a thin sheen of sweat glistens across his scarred forehead.

‘*Bravo*.’

They’ve found him. Now, to bait the hook.

***

The train trundles on, mile after mile, hour after hour, until night has fallen all around and enclosed them in shadows.

Will and Chiyoh keep to themselves in the dining carriage, staying only long enough to eat a main course before retiring to their sleeping quarters.

The beds are soft and wide, with plush covers and feather pillows. Will watches as Chiyoh prays, fascinated by the precise, delicate way in which the younger Omega moves, folder her lithe limbs to become no larger than a child, bowing her dark head over a temporary shrine created for the *kami* in the countryside around her.

What she prays for, silent but for the ringing of a small bell, is a mystery to Will, and he is left alone as she goes to the bathroom to change into sleeping robes.

The air is charged, thick with tension when she returns. Her small body is wrapped in delicate blue silk, nipples erect in the cold air, and Will feels the first stirrings of arousal. He hadn’t

expected to dream of Hannibal earlier; dozing off with his head resting against the padded wall of the carriage, slipping into his Alpha's thoughts and making love to him in the Florentine apartment…

He'd woken with a start, half-hard and blushing at the knowing smile on his companion's face. Now, lying on the top bunk, flat on his back with the covers up to his chest, Will can't help but feel an ache building.

I'll be with you soon, Alpha.

Chiyoh, perhaps sensing his thoughts, probably smelling his desire, sighs and sits on the edge of her bed. She waits for a moment, as if steeling herself, and then lies back to stare up at the springs of Will's mattress above her.

'Are we obligated to talk?' she asks, sounding tired. No doubt, after decades of isolation, speaking for so many hours must be exhausting.

'No,' Will assures her, and Chiyoh hums.

'It's strange to talk so much,' she says, confirming his suspicions. 'Not used to hearing voices outside my head.'

'I hear voices from all directions,' Will replies, thinking bitterly of his empathy disorder; his inability to switch off from the thoughts and feelings of everyone else. Then, giving voice to a thought gestating since lunch, he asks, 'In the gnawing sameness of your days, did you look at the *shape* of things? At… what you were becoming?'

A jailor. A torturer. A monster.

'I wasn't becoming anything,' Chiyoh says dully. 'I was… standing still. Exactly where he left me standing. Like taxidermy.'

'Hollowed out,' Will murmurs, fingers sliding over his own chest as he speaks, remember the same feeling after Hannibal was through with him. 'And filled with… something else.'

Filled with darkness. With decay. With him.

'Not something else,' Chiyoh says. 'I'm not as malleable as you are.'

Hannibal could never make any of his desires stick with me. They never took root as they have so easily with you.

'I was violent,' the other Omega continues, 'when it was the right thing to do. But…' She pauses, weighing her words, and then takes the plunge. 'I think you like it.'

Will rolls his head, considering her accusation.

'Hannibal and I,' he says, 'afforded each other an experience we may not otherwise have had.'

Love. A bond deeper than crests and claiming scars.

Chiyoh is quiet for a long while and then, just when Will thinks she might have fallen asleep, she says,

'If you don't kill him… you are afraid you're going to *become* him.'

The words sting. They itch where they sit on his skin, burrowing deep like ants. Will's heart skips a beat and he holds on tight to the cell phone clutched in his right hand, hidden beneath the covers. There's a new photo of the twins on it; sent from his Pops yesterday. They're the best part of him. The best part of Hannibal.

He has to keep them safe. From their father. From *himself*.

'Yes,' he whispers, tears pricking his eyes.

If it's not already too late.

Chiyoh nods to herself, knowing that Will will hear the rustle of her hair against the pillow.

'There *are* means of influence *other* than violence,' she reminds him, and the surety of Will's mission, the single-mindedness of his quest, falters.

Could he stop…? Could I influence him to stop… without hurting him? Without killing him?

The shadow inside him writhes, coiling like a viper in its nest as it tastes the air for weakness. It *wants* Will to spare Hannibal's life; it wants to rejoin him and dance in the darkness on a bridge of bones.

But the shadow is only a part of him, and Will sighs, returning his gaze to the ceiling above him.

He can't trust Hannibal. He's a killer, a psychopath, and he has to be stopped.

There's no other way.

***

The Medieval Antiquities Wing of Florence's *Palazzo Capponi* has a central room, carved from stone and supported by sculpted marble pillars. The vaulted ceiling is painted with frescoes and dripping with chandeliers, under which glint perfectly polished glass display cases of the vilest forms of human behavior.

Museum porters bring in large wooden crates of antiquities, unstrapping statues and implements from their trolleys for the new curator to place them as he wishes.

Moving between them, Inspector Rinaldo Pazzi hears the odd Alpha scent the air, feeling their eyes on him with a disapproving curiosity as he shows them his *Questura di Firenze* badge. When he murmurs *Missing Persons*, however, they seem to relax, and give him easy directions to the man he is seeking at the other end of the room.

Dr Fell is bent over a sculpture fragment, a tiny brush in his hand, cloth gloves on his hands and a bright magnifying light before his face. Rinaldo draws as close as he dares, squashing down his instincts to slip away before he can be noticed.

'Dr Fell?' he asks, working hard to keep his voice steady as the Alpha's scent caresses his nose, speaking of strength and vitality.

'Yes?' the curator replies, without turning from his work. Rinaldo decides to take it as a sign of passion for his work, rather than a snub, but it could easily be either.

Nonetheless, he pulls out his badge once again.

'I am Inspector Rinaldo Pazzi, from the *Questura di Firenze*,' he explains, offering the credentials but letting his arm drop when Dr Fell makes no move to turn to check them. At the lingering silence, he continues, 'I was wondering if you ever met your predecessor?'

'Never met him,' Dr Fell says, finally setting the brush down and turning to give the Inspector his full attention. 'Read several of his monographs.'

It's him.

The moment "Dr Fell" turns to speak to him, Rinaldo's blood runs cold. He feels his eyes prickle as they flash gold and he swallows back a whimper.

The Alpha facing him is not Dr Roman Fell, French professor specializing in Medieval Italian, but Dr Hannibal Lecter.

Il Monstro.

Hannibal is older, yes, but the face is unforgettable. Sharp cheekbones, thin, cruel lips and calculating eyes beneath fine ashen hair. And the scent… hot, like fire, mingled with morning dew and blood.

He smells like a hunter. Like a predator.

'The officers who first investigated checked the *Palazzo* for any sort of note,' he says, drawing closer, step by step, as his quarry returns to the marble bust. 'Farewell note… Suicide note… Found nothing.'

'The going assumption is that he eloped with an Omega,' Hannibal replies, choosing another brush from his kit before winking at Inspector Pazzi. '*And* their money.'

Rinaldo forced out a dry chuckle. It was a lie; Hannibal killed the former Curator, he knows it in his bones. The moment of truth; sweet as nectar, hot with certainty. It is a guiding beacon and he will stop at nothing to follow the trail.

'What is the going assumption regarding Professor Sogliato?' he asks, reminding Hannibal of his second overt removal of a *Palazzo* colleague.

"Dr Fell" adopts a look of concern.

‘Still no word?’ He shakes his head with a sigh, and Rinaldo gulps back a growl.

‘*You* may have had the last word with Sogliato,’ he says. ‘Your colleague… er…’ He checks his notebook, feigning forgetfulness despite knowing the name by heart; ‘Senior Albizzi… He tells me no-one has spoken to Professor Sogliato since he declined your invitation to dinner.’ He raises his eyebrows at the Alpha. ‘He’s the *second* one to have disappeared from the *Palazzo*.’

Hannibal doesn’t flinch, but his eyes become flat and dark, like a hunting shark.

‘Like any good investigator,’ he says, ‘I’m sure you’re sifting the circumstances for profit.’

Rinaldo’s eyes gleam, a rich, honeyed gold, and a low purr rattles his throat.

‘Both were bachelors… Well-respected scholars with orderly lives… They had some savings; nothing much.’

Their disappearances don’t make sense, and that creates suspicion. You are new, and have profited from their disappearances. That makes you suspicious.

He smiles, leaving the insinuation hanging in the air between them, and turns to leave. He’s said his piece; anything else would be supposition, and would cripple the investigation. But he can leave Hannibal Lecter to sweat a little, knowing that he knows. That’s he’s onto him.

As he walks away, however, Hannibal speaks again, calling him back.

‘*Commendator* Pazzi?’

Rinaldo pauses, keeping his back to the Alpha so as not to betray the flash of fear in his eyes.

‘Yes?’

Hannibal smirks, his heightened senses catching a salty tang of fear from the sweet Omegan Inspector. Oh, he knows that scent well; Rinaldo Pazzi was the young Detective who discovered his artwork in Florence during his first stay here –termed *Il Mostro di Firenze* by the uneducated masses.

Such a fall from grace, and now, an opportunity for reprieve. For glory, once again…

‘I believe you are a Pazzi of *the* Pazzi, am I correct?’ he asks, baiting his line. Without hesitation, Rinaldo turns, hooked.

‘How do you know that?’ he asks, frowning sharply. Hannibal lifts one shoulder in a shrug, projecting an air of coy teasing.

‘An Omega’s beauty is hard to forget,’ he says. ‘You resemble a figure at the *Della Robbia rondels*, in your family’s chapel at *Santa Croce*.’

‘Yeah…’ Rinaldo huffs a laugh, blushing at the compliment. ‘I’ve been told that.’ He grimaces. ‘That was Andrea de’ Pazzi, depicted as John the Baptist.’

‘*Then,*’ Hannibal says, drawing closer now that he’s lured him in; ‘there’s the *most* famous Pazzi of all. Francesco.’ He fiddles with his cloth gloves, ostensibly smoothing out creases but also loosening the scalpel blade tucked there, just in case. ‘The Omega who attempted to assassinate Lorenzo the Magnificent in the cathedral at Mass, in 1478.’

‘Yeah.’ Rinaldo shrugs, but his jaw is tight and his eyes are bright with anger at the remembered insult. ‘The Pazzi family were all brought low on that Sunday.’ Feeling brave, perhaps because of the adrenaline still coursing through him, he walks closer until there is barely an arm’s width between them, staring into the smug, arrogant face of the Alpha who thinks he’s above the law. Who think he’s beyond reproach. ‘If you come upon anything, *Dr Fell*, anything *personal* from the missing men, will you call me?’

‘Of course, *Commendatore*,’ Hannibal lies, watching closely as Inspector Rinaldo Pazzi, the bloodhound of Florence, strides away to follow his trail elsewhere.

When the older Omega pauses in the doorway to pluck a pamphlet for Friday’s new exhibit, glancing back with a knowing smile, Hannibal’s belly tightens.

Time to kill the good Pazzi.

***

A hunch is good, but evidence gets a conviction. The moment Rinaldo leaves the *Palazzo Capponi*, he returns to his office at the *Questura*. There, after impatiently waiting for the Internal Investigations database to load, he searches the name of the man who still haunts his nightmares.

Hannibal Lecter.

The page loads in moments.

“Voluto: Per Omicidio.” *Wanted for murder. If you have any information regarding Dr Lecter, call the local police on: 0041-315-5032*

It’s him. The image is blurry, distorted by pixels, but sharp enough that it is a dagger of ice and a flame of curiosity all at once.

Rinaldo isn’t as stupid as his colleagues believe him to be. He’s heard the rumors of a reward; a million dollars, paid in cash to whoever delivers the bounty to Mr Mason Verger of Maryland, USA.

With a million dollars, Rinaldo could retire. He could buy a house on the coast and move there with Allegra. Perhaps think about having children, once the pressures of the job are behind him.

He won’t escape justice twice.

He makes the call from a payphone in a plaza three miles away. A euro in, a dial tone and then the numbers.

The line clicks and there is silence for a moment before a crisp, cool male voice speaks in English.

‘State your business, please.’

It’s now or never.

Rinaldo closes his eyes, weighing up the risks of what he’s about to do. It could all go wrong… He could lose not only his job but his life… His freedom…

But the reward is an eyewatering sum of money, and Allegra has been talking about moving to Sicily for such a long time…

‘I may have information about Hannibal Lecter,’ he says, choosing his words carefully so as not to commit himself to something he cannot fulfil.

‘Do you know where he is *now?’* the voice asks, and Rinaldo hums.

‘I believe so.’ Hs gut churns. ‘Is the reward in effect?’

‘Why haven’t you called the police?’ the voice replies. ‘I’m required to encourage you to do so.’

Ignoring the unenthusiastic question, Rinaldo asks,

‘Is the reward payable in… “special circumstances”? To someone not… *ordinarily* eligible?’

After all, law enforcement officers are exempt from typical bounties; a method of ensuring fairness and incorruptibility within the police force.

These, are, however, desperate times.

‘Do you mean a *bounty* on Dr Lecter?’ The voice manages to sound surprised, and Rinaldo clenches his teeth at being forced to show his hand.

‘Yes.’

‘It is against international convention to offer a *bounty* for someone’s *death*, sir.’ The voice continues before Rinaldo can speak, and there’s a definite note of excitement, now. ‘Are you calling from Europe?’

‘Yes. I am. That’s *all* I’m telling you.’

‘I suggest you contact an attorney to discuss the legality of bounties,’ the voice says, and Rinaldo knows he’s in. ‘May I recommend one? There is one in Geneva. I encourage you, strongly, to call him and be frank about the matter. Would you like the number, sir?’

Rinaldo sighs, but only a little. He hadn’t really expected it to be as simple as phoning up and talking to Mason Verger – the tip-line must have had thousands of prank calls or crazies phoning up insisting they knew the location of the infamous Dr Hannibal Lecter.

At his extended hesitation, the voice prompts him again, perhaps panicking that their first good lead might bolt.

'*Sir?!'*

'Yes,' Rinaldo says, pulling a pen from his pocket. 'Give me the number.'

As he writes it down, he tries not to feel like he's signing away his life. His soul. Sealing a deal with the devil…

After all, he can always change his mind. He can speak to the lawyer in Geneva and present Mason Verger with proof of Hannibal Lecter's whereabouts, or he can walk away… He still has a choice.

Hanging up the phone and walking back to the *Questura*, he can't help but think of his ancestor, and the fate that befell him.

History won't repeat itself. It can't. And betraying Hannibal to Mason Verger isn't the same as Francesco attempting to assassinate the corrupt Lorenzo…

Everything will be fine.

***

Hannibal can't sleep. Memories of his first encounter with Inspector Rinaldo Pazzi, a Pazzi of *the* Pazzi, an Omega with the same extraordinary gift as his Will, haunt him. To help him think, he plays Mozart, *Piano Sonata No. 13 in B Flat*, the notes ringing out to hang in the still, warm Italian air.

He hears movement behind him and imagines it is Will, drawn from slumber to check on him.

'I prefer the sound and feel of the harpsichord,' he says, glancing up from the sheet music as the Omega comes to lean on the top of the baby grand, wearing a thin cotton t-shirt and boxers, his brown curls mussed from bed. 'More alive; the music arrives like experience. Sudden and entire.' Another glance up, watching as blue eyes meet his with steady certainty, perhaps already sensing the reason for the insomnia. 'The piano has the quality of a memory.'

He ends the piece with a flourish, striking the chords and leaving them ringing in the silence that follows. Placing each hand on the ends of the ebony and ivory keyboard, he sighs up at his mate.

'Today has the quality of a memory.'

'You've met Inspector Pazzi before,' Will says, and Hannibal nods.

'In my youth.' At the other man's questioning head tilt, he explains, 'We shared a fondness for Botticelli, and crossed paths in the Uffizi Gallery beneath "La Primavera".'

‘Were you… intimate?’ Will asks, and Hannibal smiles at the bite of jealousy in his Omega’s voice.

‘Not as intimate as you and I,’ he promises. ‘Though the good Inspector does share the same mirrors as you have in your mind.’

Will frowns.

‘Does he… *know*… what you are?’ he asks, and Hannibal smiles.

‘When I looked into his face,’ he says, ‘and stood close enough to smell him, I was well aware that all the elements of epiphany were present.’

‘And yet,’ Will says, pushing away from the piano, ‘here you are. Free to tell me all about it.’

Hannibal’s eyes flicker red, his lips curving into a knowing, predatory smile.

‘He must wait, and lurk, and think,’ he says. ‘It’s too soon to flush his quarry. He’s deciding what to do.’

Will frowns, his blue eyes stormy and thickly ringed with gold.

‘Someone’s put a price on your head.’

Hannibal grins, quirking an eyebrow at his beautiful, clever partner.

‘As an early-warning system, a bounty is better than radar. It inclines authorities everywhere to forsake their duty and scramble after me privately.’

Will hums, considering the truth of that statement. He wanders closer as he does and Hannibal roves his gaze over the flat chest, slim hips and soft curve of shapely buttocks. Will is in good shape, and fatherhood gives him an air of confidence and decisiveness.

He would kill to protect his young… It makes him all the more beautiful.

‘Should Rinaldo Pazzi join Professor Sogliato and the late curator of the Palazzo down in the damp?’ the Omega asks, sitting down beside his Alpha as Hannibal shifts sideways on the piano stool to make room for him. ‘Should his body be found after an apparent suicide?’

Hannibal gives the question its due consideration, but then shakes his head.

‘No.’ He stares off into the distance ahead of them, a plan forming in his mind even as he speaks. ‘Rinaldi Pazzi, a Pazzi of *the* Pazzi, Chief Inspector at the Florentine Questura, has to decide what his honor is worth.’

Will growls, low and soft, under his breath. He reaches out and places a hand on Hannibal’s knee, giving him a tight, warning squeeze through the soft fabric of his slacks.

‘What is it *worth* to be known as the man who caught Hannibal Lecter?’ he asks, reminding him of his prized status.

Hannibal covers his hand with his own, comforting and challenging in equal measures.

‘For a policeman, credit has a short half-life,’ he muses. ‘Better to sell me.’

He picks up the music again, returning to the beginning of the sonata as he allows that statement to hang in the air between them.

Rinaldo Pazzi will capitulate to Mason Verger’s bounty. He has everything to lose, after all, and nothing to gain from an arrest.

It will make killing him all the sweeter, and Hannibal’s fingers pound the keys with vigor and excitement at the thrill of the pending hunt.

Soon. I will kill him soon.

***

In a sleeper carriage on the cross-Euro train, Will drifts out of Hannibal’s mind and into a nightmare of his own making.

He can feel a drip on his face, light and warm. When he opens his eyes, he stares up at Chiyoh. She’s hanging from a thicket of antlers, impaled a hundred times over. Her hand reaches for him, her blank, dead eyes stare into him, silently screaming for help. But Will is frozen; his limbs locked into place as he watches the echo of her suffering.

I’m sorry.

He wakes with a start. His heart is racing, his limbs tingling and mouth watering from the lingering scent of blood from his dream.

Rolling onto his side, he checks for the other Omega, needing to know it wasn’t real. When he sees that Chiyoh is gone, her bunk empty and the covers rumpled, panic spikes inside him.

He dresses quickly, worried for her. Throws on the same outfit as earlier in the day and wraps his coat around him to ward off the chill of the night air. He’s glad he did – his search takes him to the very last carriage on the train, to the emergency exit and the platform at the very end.

Chiyoh stands with her hands on the railing, watching the tracks stretch out into the wooded mountains beyond. Will comes to stand beside her, resting his forearms on the railing and clasping his hands together.

They stand in silence for a moment, each appreciating the darkness and the way the bright full moon casts long shadows.

‘I like the night,’ Chiyoh finally says, gazing out at the wilderness beyond the train. ‘It’s more than a period of time. It’s another place. It’s different from where we are during the day.’

‘*We’re* different from who we are during the day,’ Will agrees, his voice equally hushed in respect for the mood the darkness evokes. ‘Little more hidden, little less seen.’

Chiyoh smiles her agreement.

‘When life is most like a dream.’

Will turns to her, giving voice to the thought that has been plaguing him since the other Omega agreed to leave Lecter Estate with him.

‘Why are you searching for him?’ It doesn’t make sense, after all; Chiyoh is quick to remind Will that she understands Hannibal, and, by inference, that she forgives him. But she also knows that Will is on his way to kill Hannibal, so there must be another reason for her helping him. ‘What are you hoping to find?’

Chiyoh dips her head, smiling as if amused by Will’s question.

‘I’m not searching for Hannibal,’ she says softly. When she looks up at him, Will sees that her eyes are blazing with a bright, protective gold. ‘I know *exactly* where he is.’

Will’s heart pauses, skips a beat, and then begins to race. She… She *knows?*

‘Is he in Florence?’

Chiyoh purrs, a gentle, intimate sound. She turns more fully towards him, closing the distance, and Will feels the heat coming from her slender body.

‘Yes,’ the other Omega admits, and Will shakes his head, befuddled by her and bewitched by the dancing honey of her eyes, the sweet scent of jasmine in her scent…

‘Why didn’t you tell me you knew?’ he asks, and Chiyoh raises one shoulder in a shrug, using the movement to sway closer still.

‘I told you,’ she murmurs, reaching out to clasp Will’s hand, linking their fingers together in a lingering brush of skin on skin. ‘There are means of influence…’ She’s closer again, her other hand on Will’s shoulder. His nose is full of her scent, his gaze locked to her face, drowning in the silky heat of her… ‘Other than violence.’

The kiss comes as a surprise. Soft lips meet, press, part. Will’s senses explode and he hears the rush of the wind racing past them, the hoot of a distant owl and the racing of his own pulse.

He hears silk rustle, feels Chiyoh’s breath ghost across his tongue and then they part, leaving his mouth tingling with pleasure.

‘But *violence*,’ Chiyoh says, ‘is what you understand.’

The shove is more unexpected than the kiss. It catches him off guard; two strong hands flat to his chest and the full strength of the other Omega against him.

Will's back hits the railing, he overbalances and he topples, buffeted by the wind and thrown a hundred feet to smash, headfirst, into the wooden tracks.

Chiyoh watches, dispassionate, as Hannibal's former mate plummets off the back of the train. She sees his body on the tracks for a moment, and then she is swallowed once again by the night, speeding on her way to her mentor, her friend, her guardian, and leaving Will Graham behind.

***

The mirrors in your mind can reflect the best parts of yourself… Come back to me, mylimasis.

A snorting breath ruffles his curls, and Will feels the velvety muzzle of the Ravenstag nudge his face. He can feel himself floating, tethered between life and death, consciousness and dreaming, and he lingers there, knowing the pain will come when he opens his eyes.

The stag is insistent. It nudges him again, breathing hard, and Will lifts an arm to shoo it away. As he does, he comes crashing back into his body and a high-pitched sound of pain escaped his throat.

Everything *hurts*. His arms, his ribs, his legs… His head, most of all.

You have to find me, Will. We have unfinished business.

The Ravenstag is walking away from him, leading him in the same direction as the train. It's strange, but somehow its fur and feathers are darker than the night around it; sucking in the light and giving nothing back. A void. The same void as in his heart and mind since Hannibal cut the crest from the back of his neck.

This way.

Will can't explain it. He just knows that he has to keep going. He has to follow the stag, the same way he did when he was suffering from heat prodrome. When it led him to Abel Gideon, and then to Hannibal.

I can't stop. I can't stop searching for him. I have to find him. I have to be with him.

Blinking blood from his eyes, Will staggers to his feet, taking the first limping, stumbling step. The stag doesn't slow, doesn't stop, and he sets his jaw in grim determination.

He has to go to Florence. Even if it means walking the rest of the way.

I'm coming, Alpha. I'm coming for you.

***

The Genevan attorney makes the arrangement for him to meet Mason Verger the next day. The cash is counted out, [an amount] in crisp American $100 bills, and Rinaldo Pazzi sits down in a sealed bank vault before a laptop. The connection is secured, encrypted from watchful eyes, and the video chat enabled.

A scarred, disfigured man appears before the Inspector. When he speaks, Mason Verger's voice is distorted by his lipless mouth and made more nasal by the constructed cavity where his nose once sat. Despite his gruesome façade, however, Mr Verger speaks in an arrogant drawl that immediately sets Rinaldo's teeth on edge.

'Hello, Rinaldo.'

'Hello.' Rinaldo makes sure to speak clearly and loudly, lest he be misheard during transmission to the United States.

'Thank you *so much* for reaching out,' Mason says, his s's mushy from damage to his gums. 'Without the cooperation of concerned citizens such as yourself, *monsters* like Hannibal Lecter would be running *wild*.'

Rinaldo suppresses a sigh, already bored of the theatrical bullshit. He's under no illusion that this bounty is for the common good – he's selling one monster to another. Nothing more.

'Shall we?' he asks, quirking a dark eyebrow at the man in the screen, and Mason narrows his glittering blue eyes in understanding.

'Let's,' he agrees. 'I will privately pay three million dollars for the doctor alive, no questions asked, discretion guaranteed. Those terms include a $100,000 advance.'

In the vault in Geneva, Rinaldo eyes the stacks of money around him. One hundred thousand dollars in unmarked bills… That alone could buy a new house, but the three million could allow him to retire with Allegra for good.

'To qualify for the advance,' Mason continues, drawing his attention once again, 'you must provide a positively identifiable fingerprint from Dr Lecter.' At the other man's stoicism, he adds, '*Capito?'*

'Yes, yes, I understand.' Rinaldo sighs, thinking longingly of the cash around him, and the challenge ahead of him.

'I will require a fresh fingerprint in situ and unlifted, for my experts to examine independently,' Mason clarifies, even as Dr Alana Bloom walks around the table to stand beside him. She's dressed in a killer red pant suit, her lips and nails painted to match, but her knuckles are white around the handle of her walking cane and her irises are almost as bright crimson as the Chanel.

She's scared.

'Now, you don't want to *alarm* the doctor,' Mason continues, ignoring her as she peers over his shoulder at the Omega on the screen. 'He may disappear too well and…' He shrugs, and Rinaldo growls his agreement at the barely-veiled threat.

'I would be left with nothing.'

'Si,' Mason says, smirking. Beside him, Alana narrows her eyes.

‘So, you have no illusions about what’s going to happen to Dr Lecter?’ she asks, scenting for weakness. ‘You would be selling him into torture and death.’

Mason glances at her, almost angry, but Rinaldo doesn’t disappoint.

‘I am aware.’

Before the deal can go sideways, Mason decides to wrap things up.

‘You’ll get the rest of the money when he’s delivered alive and in our hands.’

A surge of fear makes Rinaldo speak without thinking, leaning forwards with his eyes blazing gold.

‘I don’t want Dr Lecter near Florence when you –’

‘I understand your concern,’ Mason interrupts. ‘Don’t worry; he won’t be. Toodle-oo.’ He presses a button, ending the call, leaving Rinaldo alone in Geneva, surrounded by money not yet his.

In Maryland, Alana Bloom leans closer to her employer and conspirator.

‘Hannibal’s going to kill him, you know.’

Mason scoffs a laugh and shrugs.

I know, his gesture says, as he stares at the frozen image of the grizzled Italian Omega. *And I don’t care.*

Nothing will stop him getting his prize.

***

The following evening, when the air hangs still and wraps the city in a balmy embrace, Rinaldo Pazzi decides to make his move. He comes to the *Palazzo* after hours, when he knows nobody else will be working, and enters through a disused service door.

Unbeknown to him, Hannibal, who has stalked him here from his quaint little villa, is waiting for him and sets his gramophone to play a jaunty overture: *La Gazza Ladra*. *Commendator* Pazzi, naïve to the truth of the situation, merely pauses in the doorway of the display room, looking around and peering into the shadows seeping from the edges of the walls.

‘Dr Fell?’

His voice is weak, and doesn’t carry far. Hannibal waits, luring him closer, and Rinaldo Pazzi obliges, approaching the worktable in the center of the room. He carries a wooden box tucked under one arm, and Hannibal’s curiosity is piqued, despite his loathing of the man too weak to attempt an arrest. A man lured by the promise of easy money for betraying him to Mason Verger.

‘*Buonasea, commendatore*,’ he says, his voice rich and ringing with an Alpha purr. Hunting is, after all, his favorite pastime, and now his prey is within his grasp.

Rinaldo jumps, his pulse racing, and turns to face him. When he speaks, however, his voice is steady. Resigned.

‘Buonosera, Dr Fell.’

‘Back so soon?’ Hannibal teases, slicing through a pear with a razor-sharp knife. He lifts the flesh of the fruit to his lips and takes a bite, savoring the sweet juice on his tongue.

‘Given the nature of your exhibition,’ Rinaldo says, easing the wooden box around to play it on the table between them. ‘And the contents of our last conversation, I brought something I thought you might like to see.’

Opening the lid of the antique box, he lifts out a cruel-looking metal head cage, complete with tongue-clamp and a Medieval crest brace used on “wayward” Omegas.

‘It was supposedly worn by Francesco de’Pazzi,’ Rinaldo says, ‘when he met his end.’ He sets the contraption on the table before the box and sighs. ‘My family’s guilt, cast in iron.’

Hannibal leans forward, his face lit up with genuine excitement. It is an instrument of pain, and carries with it memories of humiliation, suffering and death.

Beautiful.

‘A Scold’s Bridle,’ he says, grinning up at Inspector Pazzi. ‘May I?’

‘Of course.’ Rinaldo watches closely as Hannibal sets the pearl-inlaid knife and half-eaten fruit onto the table, turning away to fetch white cotton gloves to protect the antique from his skin oils. There are noticeable fingerprints on the smooth steel blade – perfect for Mason Verger’s experts to examine – but there isn’t time to pick up the knife before the Alpha is back and bending to carefully pick up the bridle.

‘A wonderful heirloom,’ Hannibal says, his voice warm with approval. He sees Rinaldo’s eyes flash gold – an instinctive response to Alphan praise – and the tell-tale clench of the other man’s jaw as he fights back a purr.

Inspector Pazzi doesn’t want to feel joy at anything Hannibal Lecter says.

Well, soon all he will feel is fear.

‘I’m so glad you stopped by, *Commedator* Pazzi,’ Hannibal continues, setting the bridle back down. ‘As *I* have a family heirloom for *you*.’

‘Yeah?’ Rinaldo watches as Hannibal walks past him and, his heart racing with adrenaline, swipes for the knife with his handkerchief. He isn’t quick enough, however – he has to quickly tuck it away when the Alpha comes back carrying a narrow piece of wood, and swallows a frustrated growl.

Hannibal sets the plaque down, revealing a figure carved in excruciating detail into the mahogany. Despite the chunky style, the man's features are fine and delicate, and the links of each intestine trailing from the carved abdomen are etched in sharp relief. It is a brutal image; a hanging man, suffering in the throes of death, disemboweled add both pain and humiliation.

'Beneath the figure is written a name,' Hannibal says, his sharp eyes watching the color drain from Rinaldo's face, the pulse quicken in his throat and the narrowing of his pupils. 'Can you make it out?'

Rinaldo bares his teeth in an uncomfortable smile, his jaw clenched so tightly his ears are ringing.

'It says, "Pazzi",' he says, and Hannibal smiles back, his eyes glittering with cold menace.

'This is your ancestor, Francesco,' he explains. 'Hanging outside the Palazzo.' At Rinaldo's awkward nod, clearly not enjoying the joy with which he speaks of his dead ancestor, Hannibal continues, 'This particular illustration is "bowels out". I've seen others "bowels in". By all accounts, Francesco was led astray by thirty pieces of silver from the hand of the Papal banker.'

Just as you, dear Rinaldo, have been led astray from the law by the offer of money from Mason Verger.

The truth screams in the silence between them. The air grows charged. Each man knows the other is aware, but neither is willing to surrender the ruse.

Not yet.

'It's hard to see,' Hannibal adds, moving subtly and distracting Rinaldo by pointing back at the carving, 'but here's where the Alphan Archbishop bit him. Eyes wild as he choked, the Archbishop locked his teeth into Pazzi's flesh.'

Rinaldo swallows, sweat prickling across his forehead. The fine hairs stand up across his skin and his crest tingles, warning him of the danger posed by the Alpha before him. He wants to leave; to grab the knife and run, but Dr Fell – Hannibal – smells like fire and thick musk.

He smells like a predator, and to flee now would likely trigger Rut.

'On a related subject,' Hannibal continues, carrying the antique back to its place behind the Omega, 'I must confess; I've been giving *very* serious thought to doing the same.'

As Rinaldo grabs the knife up in his handkerchief, Hannibal attacks from behind. He uses his greater height and reach to wrap one arm snug around the Omega's chest, the other pressing a chloroformed rag to his mouth and nose.

Pazzi, realizing too late what is happening, struggles even as he sucks in a panicked breath. The drug-laced air seeps into his lungs, knocking him out, and he sags in the Alpha's arms as his head swims and his vision turns gray.

Hannibal, humming happily to himself, eases the Omega's body down onto the ground. It's all going exactly to plan.

***

At the townhouse across the city, Jack Crawford and Allegra Pazzi sit beside each other at the dining table. Each Alpha nurses an espresso, freshly ground from local beans, but not even the rich scent can cut through the layers of worry and salt-laced panic hanging like smog. Allegra twists her wedding ring round her finger, over and over and over, and Jack fiddles with the edges of the *Storia di strumenti di tortura* pamphlet, which boasts one such historic torture instrument on the cover.

'He said he would be home by now.' Allegra looks at Jack, her eyes red with fear. 'What has he done?'

Jack stirs the espresso, wondering if he should tell her of his suspicions. The bounty on Hannibal Lecter is well-known, and appears on the search list ahead of the FBI page. Rinaldo had mysteriously flown to Geneva the other day, for a meeting with an attorney he'd never mentioned before. The same law firm coincidentally used by the Verger family…

I think he's done something very, very stupid.

'I'll find him,' he promises, gulping the coffee down in one go and rising to fetch his coat. 'I'll bring him back. I promise.'

***

His head hurts. His mouth tastes like bleach. His hands and feet are tingling, as if the circulation has been cut off, and there's a tap against each side of his face, dragging him from unconsciousness. Hannibal Lecter's voice, distant at first, growing louder as Rinaldo opens his eyes and sees the Alpha's face come into focus.

'Can you hear me, Signor Pazzi? Take a deep breath while you can. Clear your head.'

Rinaldo obeys, breathing hard through his nose as his mouth is sealed shut with duct tape. He's strapped to a moving trolley, bound upright by cord and more tape, too tight and secure for him to have any chance of escaping.

As he focuses on breathing, Hannibal tilts him back and begins to push him towards one of the big windows overlooking the palazzo. There's a cool evening breeze trickling in from outside, and Rinaldo can see the stars, shining faintly above the lights of the city.

Opening the window door, Hannibal glances down to check the distance to the cobbled ground, nodding his satisfaction. High enough that Rinaldo will swing, but not so high that his wounds cannot be seen as the morning commuters pass by the palazzo on their way to work.

'I haven't had a bite *all* day,' he teases, turning to the immobilized Omega with a grin. When Rinaldo doesn't respond, he pushes the edge of the trolley right up to the stone sill and

continues, ‘Actually, your liver and kidneys would be suitable for dinner right away.’

The orange electrical cable from the floor buffer is the perfect length. Hannibal unplugs it from the electrical socket and pulls the other end from the machine.

‘Tonight, even.’ He loops the ends around to form a noose and begins winding the other end over to create the slipknot as he adds, ‘But the rest of the meat should hang for at least a week in the current cool conditions.’ As he tightens the knot, he asks, ‘I didn’t see the forecast… Did you?’ At the Omega’s icy silence, the only answer being a narrowing of bloodshot gold eyes, Hannibal shrugs. ‘I gather that means “no”.’ Returning to the noose, he neatens the links. ‘If you tell me what I need to know, *Commendatore*, it would be convenient for me to leave without my meal.’ He senses when Rinaldo Pazzi glances down, and hums his approval at the wave of salty fear rolling from the Omega. ‘I will ask you the questions and then we’ll see. You can trust me, you know.’ He purrs, just once, and feels his eyes prickle as they glow red. ‘Though, I expect you find trust difficult, knowing yourself.’

With his head clearer by the second, his heart racing with panic at what is happening and his inability to escape, Rinaldo struggles to focus on Dr Lecter’s words, even though he knows they are important.

‘When the police didn’t come,’ Hannibal says, ‘it was clear that you had sold me. Was it Mason Verger you sold me to?’

If you answer my questions, I won’t eat you.

It’s a small mercy, but the only bit of kindness Rinaldo can see offered, so he nods. Managed a muffled sound, meant to be an affirmative, and Hannibal’s eyes gleam.

‘Thank you.’ He chuckles to himself. ‘I called the number on his “wanted” site once. Far from here, just for fun.’ Done securing the noose, he slips it over Rinaldo’s head and then tightens the knot until it’s snugly above his collar. Sitting *just* a fraction above the top of his crest, adding an extra tingle of painful anticipation to the occasion, and encouraging honesty and obedience.

‘Have you told anyone at the *Questura* about me?’ he asks, and Rinaldo attempts to move, possibly shaking his head. It’s unclear, and Hannibal frowns. ‘Is that a no?’ he checks, and the Omega repeats the movement.

No. He hasn’t told anyone about his true identity.

Then, before he can ask another question, a mobile phone rings in the breast pocket of Rinaldo’s blazer. Hannibal excuses himself for the intrusion and slips a hand inside the Omega’s jacket, pulling the cell phone out and swiping the dancing green phone to answer.

‘*Pronto*,’ he says, greeting the unknown caller in a cheerful manner. The voice he hears is familiar – female and soft, though with a new resonance that has a distinctly Alphan sound to it.

‘Inspector Pazzi, my name is Alana Bloom.’ Watching the afternoon sun bleed into evening over the trees of the Verger estate in Maryland, United States, Alana feels her pulse in her throat. She’s never been this worried for an Omega before – it must be the new hormones since her accident. Since her caste change. But she can’t ignore this protective urge – she can’t *not* warn the naïve, desperate Omega of the danger he’s in.

‘You don’t know me,’ she continues, unaware that she is, in fact, speaking to the very danger of which she has called to warn. ‘But I know your benefactor.’

Hannibal considers the implications of Alana working with Mason Verger and quickly dismisses any surprise to find she has defected. She always was pragmatic, and Mason Verger’s offer of security must seem appealing.

‘Hello, Alana.’ He waits for a beat, imagining the look of dawning horror on his former colleague’s face and then continues, ‘I’m afraid the Inspector is otherwise occupied.’

‘… Is he dead?’ Alana asks, forcing the words past a swelling growl in her throat. She wants to snarl at Hannibal; to fight and savage him in defense of the Omega.

She wants to take Rinaldo Pazzi and hide as far away from Hannibal Lecter as she possibly can.

‘There’s *nothing* I would love more than to be able to chat with you, Alana,’ Hannibal says, ‘but you caught me at a rather awkward moment.’ He turns back to Rinaldo and smirks. ‘Nice to hear your voice.’

Ending the call, he tucks the cell phone back into Inspector Pazzi’s pocket and undoes the belts holding the Omega to the trolley.

‘So, *Commedatore*,’ he says, picking up their conversation as if there had been no interruption. ‘Which do you think?’ He unbuttons the blazer, spreading the fabric apart to show the delicate, vulnerable abdomen of the other man. ‘Bowels in or bowels out?’

At Rinaldo’s muffled whimper, Hannibal opens the pearl-inlaid switch blade he’d used to slice the fruit earlier.

‘Out, I think,’ he says, and stabs the knife deep into Rinaldo’s gut. Dragging the blade through the muscle, he splits him open to spill blood and guts down his front. The lacerations release foul-smelling fluid from the organs and Rinaldo spasms, his golden eyes rolling back as he chokes on blood forced back up his esophagus.

Without missing a beat, Hannibal shoves the trolley forwards and pitches him, headfirst, out of the window. Rinaldo can’t even scream as a falls; the cord whips through its coils and then snaps taut, jerking him to such a sudden stop that his neck snaps. The tear in his abdomen splits wider apart and his intestines splatter onto the cobblestones below, steaming gently in the cool night air.

Perfect.

Hannibal leans over the edge of the sill to see his work, his heart swelling with pride. The effect is dramatic and makes a statement. Betray an Alpha of power and be disemboweled, hanged, and dishonored.

At exactly the right moment, Jack Crawford steps into the palazzo, his eyes blazing with red fury and fangs bared as he sees the dead body of Rinaldo Pazzi hanging below the window where Hannibal stands.

Smiling at his former friend and current enemy, Hannibal pulls a white handkerchief from his pocket and wipes the blood from the blade. The invitation is clear, the challenge as loud as a scream.

Come and get me, Jack. If you can.

They lock eyes with each other, red on red, and then Jack snarls. He races into the building and Hannibal moves away, walking quickly to collect his suit jacket and briefcase. He has no desire to fight Jack – he would prefer to slip away and be lost, leaving behind a smiting wound of failure once again.

When he reaches the main room of the torture instrument display, however, he pauses. The gallery stinks of Rut; hot, heavy musk, laced with Jack's distinctive aftershave.

He's here, in this room. Somewhere, waiting for him.

Clever. You're learning.

Slowing his heart, Hannibal takes a few steps closer to the breaking wheel, adjusting his jacket over his arm. If he's going to fight, he wants his movements as unhindered as possible.

'Hello, Jack,' he calls, seeking out any sign of movement in the shadows hugging the walls. At the oppressive silence, he tries another lure. 'Did you get my note?'

Nothing. Hannibal feels a prickle of unease, similar to the nervousness he feels with Will, and he pulls the switchblade from his pocket again, opening it with a soft click.

'I'm truly sorry about Bella…' He speaks to cover the sound of his advance, words spilling from his mouth as his eyes check every nook and crevice for sign of the other Alpha. 'For her, night and day must have been very much the same in the end.' No movement. No thud of heavy-soled shoes on wood…

Where are you?

'When she could no longer stir or speak… did you speak for her?' He casts his barbs as low as possible; anything to garner a response. A reaction he can use to pinpoint the other man's location. 'I imagine you were capable of giving *any* medication Bella may have needed in the night…' He smirks, enjoying himself. 'Did you practice injections on an orange, Jack?'

There's a click, a rustle of static and then classical music plays. The same record that Hannibal played earlier, when he lured Inspector Pazzi up to this very room.

Hannibal spins, trying to catch sight of Jack near the gramophone, but there's nothing. Just the display cabinets; glass shining softly in the low light, Omegan crest rippers and knuckle-breakers glinting inside.

'What medication did you give her in the end?' he asks, looking left to right without moving. 'Was it too much? Or just enough?'

Having removed his coat, jacket and shoes, Jack Crawford comes up quickly behind Hannibal. The sound of the music covers the whisper of his socked feet and he grabs the other Alpha by the hair, wrenching him around and throwing him, bodily, through the glass of a weapons display cabinet.

Hannibal, having landed on his backside, growls up at the other Alpha, who paces in front of him like a tiger.

As Hannibal pulls himself up, Jack delivers a sharp kick square to his chest, launching him backwards to fly several feet away. Hannibal lands, hard, on his back, cracking his skull on the floor, and Jack takes the opportunity to climb through the ruined display cabinet and advance. As the smaller Alpha lifts his head, Jack punches him, throwing all of his strength into it. Hannibal drools blood and tries to crawl away, needing a moment to recover. But Jack unclips a wicked three-pronged hook from the display case and stabs it straight down into his calf, snagging his muscle and using the painful grip to drag him closer for another beating.

Hannibal cries out, fingers scrabbling uselessly for the fallen switchblade. He snarls as Jack uses the hook to pull him, hot pain shooting up his leg as the metal tears flesh and muscle, but he uses the movement to twist onto his back and kicks up with his heel as Jack bends over to hit him again. His shoe connects solidly with Jack's chin, making him reel, but it's not enough to topple him and Jack springs back with another hard punch to his face.

Hannibal's nose breaks, his eye swells and he sees bright spots. Before he can catch his breath, Jack thumps his kidneys, his ribs, his kidneys again, pounding into his flesh with the deadly accuracy of a man fighting with logic, not emotion.

Another uppercut to his nose knocks him flat on his back, and when Jack reaches down to grab two fistfuls of his shirt and waistcoat, Hannibal clings on to his forearms. Jack pulls him up and they both stagger, struggling against each other's strength, but, before he can do anything to rectify the situation, Hannibal finds himself flung through the air to hit a body cage and then the base of the breaking wheel.

Sweating and breathing hard, Jack rolls up his shirtsleeves and rebalances himself. Hannibal wrenches the hook from his calf, gasping out a groan at the agony of it, but before he can do more than get to his feet, the other Alpha is charging again.

Jack swings his arm, his fist connecting with Hannibal's cheek. He knocks him back against the wheel and Hannibal slips in his own blood, bashing his forehead against the wood. He falls, trapping his arm in the spokes, and Jack uses the wheel to crush the bones of his elbow.

He needs to make Jack angry. Bait him into a misstep.

‘I brought Bella back from death,’ he gasps, fighting the darkness clouding the edges of his vision. ‘And you’ve returned her to it.’ As the other Alpha snarls at him, he smirks up into his face. ‘Is that where you’re taking *me*, Jack?’

Jack growls, and punches him, again, right in the nose. Hannibal sags, momentarily losing consciousness, and comes back to the present just in time for Jack to drag him up to his feet and headbutt him. When he drops him over his shoulder, Hannibal crashes through the glass of another display cabinet, shards sticking to the blood pooling on his cheeks and in his eye sockets.

The beating goes on and on. Hannibal finds himself pinned up against the wall, kicked and smacked back and forth, barely able to breathe between each blow. It’s like being a child again; chained and tortured for the amusement of rabid Alphas, and Hannibal feels the first flicker of true fear since the fight began.

Is Jack going to beat me to death?

The moment Jack stops, pausing to catch his breath, Hannibal lunges. He doesn’t care how he looks, how he sounds; he just needs to escape.

The window.

Exhausted from the fight but determined to finish it, once and for all, Jack takes a moment to catch his breath. Adjusting his bloodstained sleeves, he returns for the three-pronged hook, which is dripping with the other Alpha’s blood. Hannibal is on his front, dragging himself with animal desperation through the alcove where he’d held Rinaldo Pazzi in his final moments.

The window… I can escape through the window.

Hannibal pulls his broken body up the lip of the windowsill. He’s at the edge, nearing collapse, and he sits for a moment as another wave of gray spots blind him, his limbs losing their strength. He can’t bait Jack; can’t rile him. Can’t do anything to make him falter. Make him stop.

Jack comes again, filled with righteous wrath, and Hannibal sees his fate in those glowing, crimson eyes.

‘How will you feel?’ he asks, his voice hoarse and wavering, a tooth loose and his whole body throbbing with pain even as patches of numbness spread. ‘… When I’m gone?’

Jack smirks, and hefts the hook in his right hand.

‘Alive,’ he breathes, and whacks the hook as hard as he can across Hannibal’s face.

The pain is blinding. Hannibal’s heart skips a beat with it and he topples backwards, freefalling for a sickening moment before –

Broken fingers scream as he catches hold of Rinaldo Pazzi’s dead, hanging body. His shoulders burn as he swings, holding his weight on the lifeless Omega, but he’s alive.

Literally clinging to life with the tenacity of someone who has been to the edge before. Someone who knows just how far the body can go before it breaks.

I'm broken but I'm not dead, yet.

Lunging for the window, Jack grabs the frame for balance. He stares over the edge, expecting to see Rinaldo's hanging body and then, broken on the cobbles below, Hannibal. Instead, to his horror, he finds the other Alpha clutching the dead Omega, breathing hard and smirking up at him. As their eyes lock, a thousand words pass between them, each one sharp as a knife.

You've failed again, Jack. You should have killed me when you had the chance.

He could still fall. Jack knows it's a slim hope but, as he watches the Chesapeake Ripper, the Monster of Florence – *Will's mate and the father of his children* – all he wants to see is the other man lose his grip and fall to his death.

It'll be over for good… Just die, and let us all go.

Hannibal breathes, just breathes, giving himself a moment. Jack is frozen, despair leeching the strength from his legs, and the moment stretches for eternity.

Then, unable to hold the additional weight, Rinaldo's body begins to rip. Hannibal jolts, slipping down a leg, the sinew stretching and snapping, and then lets himself fall.

I'm not dying, Jack. Not today. Not for you.

It's further to the ground than he'd thought. Hannibal lands with a thud, cracking his elbow and skinning his forearm. His ankle twists and rocks dig into the torn muscle of his calf. There's a myriad of pain and Hannibal groans, too exhausted to worry about his score of injuries. His world narrows to a simple focus; his desire to escape. To get back to the safety of his apartment. His territory. His nest.

Checking the state of his elbow, wondering if he can summon the strength to pop the joint back into place, Hannibal risks one last glance up at Jack. The other Alpha stares, dismayed and defeated, and Hannibal manages a final, lingering smirk before he limps away into the gloom of the night.

It's over. He's won. Again.

I always win, Jack.

Dolce

Chapter Summary

Will reunites with Hannibal in Florence. Alana and Margot's relationship becomes more intimate, and Mason works with Cordell to plan the menu for his former psychiatrist.

Chapter Notes

Hey, peeps! As always, I hope you enjoy this latest instalment! I'll post again ASAP and am hard at work on my non-A/B/O season 4 story as well. :-)

Take care, everyone, stay safe and well! xxx

SIX

Dolce

When Will sees Hannibal enter their apartment, injured as he is, he's surprised the other man made it home at all.

'Jack Crawford is here,' Hannibal gasps, and collapses onto a chaise lounge barely two steps into the room. Blood has soaked through his white shirt and he's tied a tourniquet around his leg with his belt to stem the flow from his torn calf. His face is a mess of swelling, bruises and cuts, with a particularly vicious dent in his cheek, suggesting a fracture to the bone beneath.

'Did you kill him?' Will asks, hiding his dismay at the wounds and wrapping an arm around his Alpha to help him into the bathroom. 'Or did you show mercy?'

Hannibal huffs a laugh and lowers himself onto the window seat. As Will runs him a hot bath, he undresses with sore, shaking hands.

'I didn't get the chance,' he confesses, dropping the pile of torn, stained clothes to the side for burning. '*He* showed *me* mercy.'

Will glances up at him, perched on the edge of the tub, his hand in the water to test the temperature. His expression is unreadable; a myriad of emotions shimmering beneath the blue surface of his eyes, and Hannibal feels a pang of longing.

I know you're not really here – he thinks, his imagined companion blurring to become blond-haired Bedelia – *but I wish you were.*

The daydream is preferable to reality, and Hannibal indulges himself in the notion of being cared for by his Omega. Will lends him a shoulder to lean on as he eases down into the scalding tub, and runs soothing fingers through his blood-crusted hair as Hannibal's breathing betrays him with a hitch.

'I've got you,' Will murmurs, wetting the strands before massaging shampoo into the tender, torn scalp. 'Let me clean you up.'

Hannibal nods and pushes the pain to the edges of his mind through an effort of focused breathing and meditation.

Blood drips into the bath, blossoming into red clouds that soak into the sponge Will dunks. He uses the stained water to rinse Hannibal's face, then his shoulders, and kneels beside the tub when he reaches the arms.

Hannibal remains silent, his eyes closed and head tilted back. One could be forgiven for thinking him asleep, were it not for the sharpness of his scent as Will works, and the Omega smells his own sweet arousal at the display of dominance and control.

Even in the face of death, even in agony, you're still in charge. You're still a predator.

'Did you kill Inspector Pazzi?' he asks softly, reaching for Hannibal's arm and tilting it palm-upwards. 'Was it as you planned?'

Hannibal opens an eye and glances down the length of his wrist. The wounds from Matthew Brown glow white against the honeyed hue of his tan and he sees Will falter; smells the intoxicating blend of guilt and righteous fury that his beloved feels at the memory of attempting to kill him.

'Rinaldo Pazzi sold me, yes,' he replies, and Will's fingers tremble around the sponge. They both know what this means; Hannibal has killed him, an Omega. It is an abhorrent thing for an Alpha to do, but was it an act of sadism or self-defense?

'To Mason Verger?' Will checks, and Hannibal closes his eyes with a confirming hum. He doesn't acknowledge the sting of water falling into the numerous cuts on his hand; doesn't allow his perception of reality to waver when Will rubs ointment into the worst of the slices.

When it comes time for Will to suture his calf, however, he keeps a close watch. Will helps him balance his leg on the edge of the tub, angling a gild-framed mirror to allow Hannibal a close view of the wound.

'You'll need to stitch the muscle, first, then the skin,' the Alpha says, and Will takes a deep breath to settle his nerves before he starts.

Hannibal places a gentle hand on his shoulder, smiling when Will glances at him.

'I trust you.'

We're in this together. All the way.

Will nods, and begins to sew. He threads the curved hook through the flesh, tugging the thread to form a neat, if wonky, line.

'I know you'd do better,' he says, grimacing at the other man. 'It'll leave a scar.'

'Your hands are steadier than mine right now,' Hannibal assures him, holding out his rope-burned palms, showing him the trembling fingers. 'And scars are the cracks on an oil canvas, remember?'

'Stories of a life lived,' Will murmurs, and, reaches for the surgical scissors.

At the same moment, just as Bedelia du Maurier cuts the last of the surgical thread in her apartment with Hannibal, the *Questura di Firenze* use a pair of shears to sever the electrical cord suspending Inspector Pazzi's corpse above the courtyard of the *Palazzo Capponi*.

The Omega's body is caught and reverently lowered into a bag on the stretcher beneath him, a half-dozen Alphas taking every care to treat the murdered man with care.

The respect he was denied in life, Will Graham thinks, limping closer through the lines of early-morning onlookers, *they now show him in death.*

'Jack,' he calls, announcing his presence to the burly Alpha stood watching on the other side of the tape.

His former boss and mentor turns, grimly shaking with him as he takes in the bruised and cut appearance of the foolhardy Omega. He doesn't ask what happened; perhaps he senses that Will won't tell him, and merely leads the way inside. With his professional reputation at the FBI preceding him, he has managed to secure private access to the crime scene, and Jack takes Will straight to the display room of the *Palazzo Capponi*

Stepping inside, Will's chest tightens and his heart skips a beat. His nose is assaulted with the scent of his Alpha; injured and exhausted, afraid… Hannibal has been wearing a different cologne; sharper than any previously worn.

Will doesn't like it.

'He's wounded,' Jack says, watching as Will examines the items on display, touching everything. 'And he's worried.'

'No,' Will says, picking up a wood carving of the infamous Omegan traitor, Francesco Pazzi. It had been on the floor, alongside a dozen of Hannibal's scattered possessions, and retains a lingering scent of his Alpha in the grain. 'Hannibal doesn't worry. Knowing he's in danger won't rattle him anymore than killing does.'

He sets the carving down and moves to the blood-smeared breaking wheel.

'If Rinaldo Pazzi had decided to do his job as an officer of the *law*,' Jack growls, 'he would have determined very quickly that he was Hannibal Lecter. It would have taken less than

thirty minutes to get a warrant.'

'All those resources were denied to Pazzi,' Will says, scoffing a bitter laugh as he limps past him. 'As soon as he decided to sell Hannibal, he became a bounty hunter.'

'Outside the law and alone,' Jack muses, refusing to acknowledge how uncomfortable Will's prowling makes him. The Omega, dressed in an expensive navy suit, something not unlike the type of suit his former Alpha would wear, moves like a predator. Will is keenly focused, his golden eyes taking in every detail of the fight scene and the life that Hannibal has built for himself. When he chuckles dryly at the statement, Jack adds, 'And here *we* are. Outside the law and alone.'

I'm not alone, Will thinks, but he keeps quiet as Jack comes to stand beside him. The Alpha's scent is thick with the old musk of Rut. It slithers up Will's nostrils, turning his stomach, and he has to move away before he retches.

'Have you told *la polizia* they're looking for Hannibal Lecter?' he asks, clenching his back teeth against nausea.

Jack growls under his breath.

'They're motivated to find Dr Fell *inside* the law,' he says, sharp with desperation. He turns to watch Will pace, knowing that the Omega just needs this to be over and done with, to have closure so he can go back home to his kids and be at peace. But it's too dangerous to ask for help from the authorities. Will must understand that? 'Knowing *who* he is, what he's worth… it'll just coax them out of bounds.'

'It'd be a free-for-all,' Will agrees, and Jack nods.

'And Hannibal will slip away,' he says, studying the Omega with narrowed eyes. He has to ask, even though he doesn't want to. But he needs to know. '… Will you slip away with him?'

He doesn't trust me. Will looks back over his shoulder, curious at the surge of excitement the notion brings. *I don't trust myself, either.*

'Part of me will *always* want to,' he admits, and Jack nods.

'You have to cut that part out,' he says, prompting a bitter laugh from the Omega.

'I think Hannibal did the cutting,' he says, rubbing above the tender, tingling skin on the nape of his neck. Jack winces, regretting his choice of words, but Will moves the conversation on before he can force an apology out. 'Of course you found him here.' He looks around at the museum, ignoring the reflection of a pale, pinched face in the glass. When Jack frowns in question, he explains, 'Not because of the exhibit, but because of the *crowd* it attracts.'

He comes to a stop beside the shattered glass of the starvation cage display case and turns to the Alpha, who approaches slowly from the other side.

‘You *had* him, Jack… He was *beaten*.’ Will imagines his Alpha, battered and bleeding, lying crumpled at Jack’s feet. The subsequent image of mercy, of Jack *allowing* him to escape, wrenches a snarl from his throat. ‘Why didn’t you kill him?’

The passion in Will’s voice, coupled with the view of him through the bars of the starvation cage, as if Will is trapped inside, hungry with the need to hunt his former mate, strikes at Jack’s heart. He feels his irises prickle red and it takes all of his strength not to reach out to offer the Omega physical comfort.

I can’t imagine how hard this must be for you, he thinks, even as, aloud, he says,

‘Maybe I need *you* to…’

Will sighs, and Jack lowers his eyes in apology for the burden he’s placed on the younger man’s shoulders. The tenuous accord they have struck, which is entirely dependent on Will’s rage being stronger than his former loyalty.

I know I should kill him, Will muses, resuming his inspection of the exhibit, and everything his Alpha has built here. *I just don’t know if I’ll be able to twist the knife when I strike.*

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Across the city, as the mid-morning breeze ruffles his freshly dried hair, Hannibal sketches the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore; its iconic dome rising high above the rooftops of the buildings edging the palazzo.

‘I want to be able to draw these streets from memory,’ he says, speaking without glancing up when he senses Bedelia approach. The other Alpha stops before him, glancing down at the detailed charcoal artwork, so like the view from their apartment balcony, and Hannibal continues, ‘I want to be able to draw the Palazzo Vecchio and the Duomo.’

‘You won’t be coming back here for a very *long* time.’ Bedelia takes the pencil and tugs the leather-bound sketchbook from Hannibal’s grasp, reminding him of their deadline.

Hannibal sighs.

‘Memories of Florence will be all I have,’ he says, his gaze growing distant. ‘Florence is where I became a man.’ He smiles sadly. ‘I see my end and my beginning.’

Bedelia hums, her lips thinning in a cruel, knowing smile.

‘All of our endings can be found in our beginnings,’ she says, sauntering back inside. ‘History repeats itself, and there is no escape.’

She stops before the dining table, where a small suitcase and hand luggage sit waiting.

Limping up behind her, Hannibal inspects the bags.

‘You’ve packed lightly,’ he comments, and Bedelia slips the sketchbook into the side-pocket of the suitcase.

‘I’ve packed for *you*,’ she explains, turning to face her captor and conspirator. ‘This is where I leave you. Or, more accurately, where *you* leave *me*.’

Hannibal considers the words. Considers the offer before him, and admires the woman’s nerve.

‘This isn’t how I intended to say goodbye,’ he says, draping his coat over his arm. ‘I imagined it differently.’

Bedelia’s eyes gleam; rich red thickening to swallow cerulean blue.

‘*I* didn’t.’ She saunters closer, body wrapped in a navy dress, nearly matching the other Alpha’s height by the six-inch stilettos on her feet. She’s dressed powerfully, and exudes confidence. ‘I *knew* that you intended to eat me. And I knew that you had no intention of eating me *hastily*.’

Hannibal smiles, his own eyes dark and flat like a shark’s.

‘It would be a shame not to savor you,’ he replies, his like for her vastly outweighed by his desire to consume her flesh.

Bedelia graces him with a grim, thin-lipped smile.

‘I have not *marinated* long enough for your tastes,’ she says, referring not only to the oysters, acorns and marsala wine that has been her diet for the past few months, but her mental preparation as well. Hannibal’s influence is dark and insidious; he has slowly been chipping away at any remaining sense of morality and goodness in her, leaving her own darkness raw and exposed.

Hannibal swallows, agreeing with the sentiment but disappointed not to carry out the recipes he has planned, and Bedelia smiles.

‘When they come for you –’

‘And they *will* come,’ Hannibal says, certain that Will, at least, is closing in.

‘– What will you say of me?’ Bedelia asks, the first hint of fear coloring her voice. Hannibal finds it interesting that it is not the prospect of him eating her alive that frightens her, but the idea that her reputation might be sullied; that she might be imprisoned and held accountable for her choices during her time with him.

He smiles.

‘I will help you tell the version of events you want to be told,’ he promises, adding, before she asks why, ‘I will help you because you *asked* me to.’

And that means you owe me a debt. A debt that will, someday, be paid.

Bedelia smiles, fully aware that she is leaving his side indentured to him, and closes the distance still further.

‘You may make a meal of me yet, Hannibal…’ Her breath ghosts across his lips; soft, pliant lips, that hide deadly teeth. Hannibal smells her fear, and her arousal, and dips his head to meet the kiss. It is chaste but poignant; their first embrace, a physical representation of their intimacy.

The only taste he will get of her.

Bedelia pulls back with a smirk, her eyes blazing crimson with victory.

‘… But not today.’

She has won. She has survived him. Now, she just needs to survive Will Graham.

***

At the Verger estate in Maryland, USA, Cordell Doemling is preparing a sample menu for his employer. Taking the freshly slaughtered piglets from the walk-in refrigerator, he slices through the tails at the rump, skinning the flesh from the meat and chopping into sections. Then, as they marinate in oil and seasoning, he chops garlic and ginger before frying them off to create an Asian-inspired dish.

‘Pig tails,’ he announces, lifting the silver lid on the bowl that he places before Mason Verger at the dining table. ‘Cut into sections to give the aesthetic of fingers cut at the joint.’

‘Finger food…’ Mason huffs a laugh at his own wit, looking down at the delicacies his caretaker has provided for him. ‘Huh.’

‘Hands are how we touch the world,’ Cordell explains. ‘They’re tactile. Sensual.’

Especially when wrapped around a young girl’s throat, squeezing the life from her. Or elbow-deep inside a boy’s rectum, making him squeal.

‘Remove an arm,’ he continues, smiling down at his employer, ‘and your patient will still feel phantom digits.’

I should know, he thinks; *I did it often enough at the Asylum. Nobody cared about those patients; they were all mine to play with.*

‘Imagine,’ he finishes, picking up a fork to stab the first delicacy, ‘how Dr Lecter will feel when he watches you nibble on *his* fingers.’

‘Oh, poetry, Cordell, *poetry*,’ Mason croons, opening his malformed mouth to take the offering.

‘In a ginger, black-vinegar sauce,’ Cordell adds, and Mason begins to chew. The moment he does, crushing the nub with his molars, he gags on the texture of the food.

‘Eugh! It’s mostly skin and bone!’

Cordell shrugs and moves the bowl to the side, ready for the second course.

‘The actual fingers will have more meat,’ he explains. ‘Then, there’s the marrow.’ He lifts a second silver lid, using the same fork to pierce a soft ball of meat from the dish inside. ‘Here it is, in a fermented bean sauce.’

Mason, having swallowed the imitation finger, opens his mouth for the marrow. The flavors explode across his tongue but the balance is all wrong and he retches.

‘Ugh! I prefer the ginger!’

The sudden flood of saliva is too much for his damaged throat. As some of it trickles down, the muscles lock and he nearly chokes on the food.

‘No, no,’ Cordell says, reaching for a bowl. ‘Spit.’

The marrow hits the bottom of the dish with a melodic ring and Cordell’s blue eyes gleam with joy as Mason frowns, curious.

‘A Buddhist singing bowl,’ he explains. ‘The song represents the start of a new day.’

The rise of the Betas. The truly supreme race.

‘Buddhists don’t eat meat,’ Mason grumbles, but Cordell just shrugs, unbothered by the difficult client.

‘But this isn’t meat,’ he reasons, raising an eyebrow when Mason looks at him in confusion. ‘This is man.’

Mason can’t argue with that, nor does he want to. As Cordell moves the singing bowl away, setting the table for the rest of his master’s supper, Mason muses aloud to himself.

‘Papa always used to say meat was a people business… He was a pioneer in livestock production; I’m sure *he’s* eaten someone.’ He shivers. ‘I must admit; I tremble at the notion myself.’

Cordell, basting the imitation fingers with the sauce before adding them to a plate of mashed vegetables and potatoes, smiles.

‘I find there’s something reassuring about you eating Dr Lecter,’ he says, smirking at how *easy* it is to play Mason’s insecurities against himself, whilst stroking his ego, manipulating him into giving him everything he wants. ‘It makes *you* the apex predator.’

No more “Alphas first”. No more second-best for Betas. I was born to rule, and I will.

‘I like that,’ Mason agrees, nodding to himself. ‘“Apex predator”.’

Cordell straightens, an idea making his eyes burn with a mad, cruel light.

‘We could *Peking Duck* him,’ he suggests, and Mason raises an eyebrow.

‘Oh…?’ he prompts, inspiring Cordell to turn and grin.

‘You have to torture a duck to prepare it,’ he says, foregoing modern convention and referring to the traditional methodology for added flair. ‘Pump its skin up with air, then glaze it with hot honey and hang it by its neck until it dries.’

‘*Mmm*… and then roast until crispy…’ Mason closes his eyes, imagining himself at a banquet table, Dr Lecter’s Peking-style body laid out before him. The skin is puffed up, darkened to a beautiful brown and shiny with glaze. When Mason strolls along the side of the table, he runs two fingers through the honey sitting atop the dead Alpha’s crisp, snappable skin, sucking the marinade off with the sort of deep, rumbling purr he can’t manage with his own Beta body.

‘Transubstantiation.’

He’s the winner. He’ll *always* be the winner. No matter what.

The dream fades into the ringing of his cell phone, and Mason groans as he wakes from sleep. With his one good hand, he fumbles around on the covers for his controller, his fingers long and pale, like the spindly legs of a spider. When he eventually finds the remote, he pushes the button to activate the connected phone.

‘I’m here,’ he says. ‘Tell me.’

‘Sir.’ The lawyer in Geneva sounds apologetic, and worried. He should be. The last envoy was shot for delivering a disappointing message. ‘It’s… not good news.’

***

Watching the Italian news broadcast of Inspector Pazzi’s death, Alana Bloom is surprised by the level of revulsion she feels at the Omega’s death. She’s never experienced such a gut-wrenching, bone-deep sense of *wrongness* before, but knowing that Hannibal has murdered Inspector Pazzi, and that Mason Verger had a hand in the killing, makes her want to be sick.

The news anchor is an Alpha, dressed in a sharp red blazer that matches the crimson of her eyes. The irises themselves are the only indication of her emotion, but the turmoil raging there is palpable, and even Mason cannot stand the sight of her for long. With a stab of his wasted, pale forefinger, he switches off the television and a ringing silence follows.

Well, the room appears to say, each member of the cabal holding his or her breath in anticipation of the Verger heir’s fury. *That didn’t go to plan.*

Mason wishes he could clench his back teeth but the muscles of his jaw no longer have the strength. His thumb twitches; he can’t even ball his hand into a fist.

If I were an Alpha, my eyes would be blazing red like Papa’s used to.

‘I feel like I just paid a lot of money for a dead dago,’ he growls, and Margot looks away so as not to flinch. She may be safe from her brother’s “attention” since the accident, but he is as inventive as ever when he takes out his anger on her.

‘Feces will fly about Pazzi,’ she says, attempting a neutral statement to both agree with, but not stoke, her brother’s wrath.

‘Better get it out that Pazzi was dirty,’ Mason says, speaking more to the hulking figure of Cordell at his shoulder. ‘They’ll take it better if he was dirty.’ He frowns. ‘*Was* he dirty?’

‘Except for this, I don’t know,’ Margot replies, and Alana smells the sweet, salty spike of fear. She clenches her fist around the handle of her walking cane and takes a slow, deliberate step forwards, using her Alphan body as a shield and acting as a distraction for Mason.

‘What if they trace Pazzi back to you?’ she asks, but Mason scoffs the concern away.

‘Oh, I can take care of *that*.’

‘You took care of Pazzi,’ Alana reminds him, and Mason narrows his eyes at the challenge she is so openly presenting to him.

‘I have little interest in the expensive piece of *meat* twitching at the end of that electrical cord, Dr Bloom.’

The dismissive tone makes it *very* clear what he thinks of the dead Omega, and Alana allows a touch of anger to color her voice.

‘Might *want* to get interested.’ Before she loses her investor, she reminds him, ‘Hannibal could disappear too well and you’d be left with nothing.’ *We can’t let that happen. I can’t let that happen.* She sighs. ‘Better buy another cop.’ Then, as if adding an afterthought, ‘Better buy the whole department.’

He won’t be so lucky next time.

***

Once Hannibal has left the apartment, Bedelia Du Maurier acts quickly. Loosening the bottom screw of the left-hand vent in the bathroom, she slides her hand inside until she feels soft leather until her fingers.

She withdraws a slim brown wallet and carries over to the little desk on which sits the crystal decanters of whisky and brandy. Unrolling the pouch, she removes the latex tourniquet from inside and, once she’s rolled up the sleeve of her dress, wraps it tight around her bicep.

Engrossed as she is with bringing the vein up to the surface, she doesn’t immediately notice the presence of another person in the room. It is only the faint stirring of air, carrying with it the sugar-sweet scent of an unbonded Omega, that she looks up.

A young Japanese woman, dressed in a military coat and carrying a rifle, stands in the doorway behind her. Bedelia can see her in the mirror, which stands off to her right.

Without turning, Bedelia speaks.

‘You must be looking for Hannibal Lecter.’ The young Omega doesn’t move, but a flicker of gold acknowledges the response in her eyes and Bedelia nods. ‘One of his patients?’

‘No.’ Chiyoh studies the Alpha carefully. She doesn’t smell much like Hannibal, even though her belongings share the same space as her mentor, and she’s much too sharp and cruel to be his partner. ‘Not a patient. Where is he?’

Bedelia smiles and, finally turning in the chair, replies,

‘Seeing how you let yourself in, forgive me if it’s forward for me to ask… Who the hell *are* you?’

Another mate? Does Hannibal have a harem of Omegas, like the Alphas of old? I’d be surprised, given how obsessed he is with Will Graham. But perhaps the other man is a new toy in a long line of broken things.

Chiyoh narrows her blazing gold eyes.

‘Family.’

Ah… The infamous Charge… I remember Hannibal mentioning his Omegan Ward.

Bedelia rises and saunters closer, a low purr rumbling in the air between them.

‘And you’ve come *all* the way from home.’

Chiyoh jerks her chin at the other woman.

‘Who are *you?’*

Bedelia smiles and leans against the gilded doorframe.

‘I’m his psychiatrist.’

Chiyoh glances, pointedly, at the tourniquet, and the wallet containing vials of drugs and a syringe on the table behind her.

Bedelia shrugs, unashamed to be caught about to inject herself with an illicit substance.

‘Medicinal purposes,’ she says, loosening the band.

Chiyoh smiles sadly and shakes her head. The Alpha before her is so broken, she can’t even see how deep into the abyss she is. She think she’s in control, that somehow she’s coping, managing her involvement with Hannibal, but she’s dancing on thin ice and there’s no rope to pull her to safety.

‘You’re like his bird,’ she says, remembering the same feeling. A feeling that Will Graham stoked in her when he released her from the Lecter Estate. ‘I’m his bird, too.’ She grimaces. ‘He puts us in cages, to see what we’ll do.’

Bedelia hums in agreement.

‘Fly away, or dash ourselves dead against the bars.’

‘*You* haven’t flown away,’ Chiyoh points out, and Bedelia smirks.

‘*You* are flying right *towards* him.’ She quirks an eyebrow. ‘How *does* he inspire such… *devotion?’*

Chiyoh frowns, offended by the insinuation that she might be bonded to her Guardian.

‘You’re his *psychiatrist*,’ she replies, her tone icy. ‘You tell me.’

Bedelia considers the response, and then gives a languid shrug.

‘You could add to what I’ve learned from my experience with him… and from the mute postures of the dead.’ Her eyes gleam with a dark, feral light, and she steps forwards as she asks, softly, ‘Were you there? Did you *watch* as the wild beast within him turned from the teat and entered the world?’

Chiyoh sighs, the vibrant gold in her eyes dimming with sorrow.

‘I met the beast,’ she replies. ‘And I saw him grow.’ A sharp note of concern colors her scent with lemongrass and smoke. ‘Someone wants to kill him.’

Bedelia’s upper lip curls back from her fangs in a sneer.

‘More than *one* someone, I’d say.’ She tilts her head, considering the tall, deadly Omega before her. ‘What do *you* want?’

Chiyoh smiles; swift and cold.

‘I want to cage him.’

Like he caged me.

Bedelia’s gaze softens.

‘I thought Will Graham was Hannibal’s biggest mistake… I wonder if it isn’t *you*.’ She smiles. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me... I have to take my medicine.’

Before Will Graham comes for me.

***

The cap of the glass capsules breaks easily. The fluid inside is tinged red, like blood in the water. As Bedelia prepares a dose of the concoction, she wonders how far Hannibal has made it by now.

The needle pierces the skin of her arm, sliding deep into the vein pulsing in the crook of her elbow. With a swift and decisive plunge, Bedelia empties the contents of the syringe into her

system and –

She's floating.

Her heart skips a beat. Her mind breaks free of its tether to soar high, joining the celestial chorus of angels painted on the apartment ceiling. She doesn't feel the sting of the needle coming out, but the bead of blood welling, holly-red, is fascinating. When she smears it across her skin with her forefinger, she's obsessed with the way it slides into her pores, staining the fabric of her reality…

This is my freedom. My escape.

She's reaching for the cherubs above her when there comes a sharp series of knocks on the apartment door.

Just in time.

Wrenched back to reality, Bedelia sets the latex band and syringe aside. When she stands, she can't feel her legs and the floor slips and slides away from her. She isn't concerned, though. She isn't… anything.

The knocking comes again, louder, and more insistent. Bedelia rolls down her sleeve and then, very carefully, opens the door an inch to see who is disturbing her.

At the sight of a familiar blonde Alpha, Will Graham smirks. He'd suspected, but to have it confirmed…

He scoffs at her audacity, her *stupidity*, and raises an eyebrow at her.

'"Mrs. Fell", I presume?'

Bedelia blinks, slowly and carefully, like somebody very drunk or…

At the whiff of chemicals on her skin, Will rolls his eyes at Jack.

'She's drugged,' he says, and the other man gives the apartment door a confident push. Bedelia falls back a step, too dazed to stop them, and follows, swaying gently, as she invites them inside.

'May I ask what this is about?' she asks, seemingly grossly unashamed of her appearance. 'Are you friends of my husband's?'

'Hannibal's not your *husband*,' Will growls, his darkness bubbling like acid at the idea that Hannibal might take this viper as his companion. Or worse; his lover. 'He's barely your captor.'

'Where is he?' Jack asks, cutting through the bullshit and pinning Bedelia with a furious stare.

‘I don’t know,’ Bedelia replies, allowing herself to flop down into an armchair. ‘Perhaps at work? He’s the curator for the Palazzo Capponi.’

‘We know,’ Will says, trailing his fingertips along the edge of the piano. ‘He killed Chief Inspector Pazzi there, last night.’

Jack moves to the little side table and picks up one of the little capsules, holding it to the light to inspect the fluid inside.

‘My husband is a doctor,’ Bedelia explains, her limbs loose on the armrest, struggling to focus on them. ‘He’s been treating my condition.’

‘And what condition *is* that, *Mrs. Fell?’* Jack asks, keeping an eye on Will as the Omega inspects the rest of the lavish apartment from his position on the other side of the chairs.

‘I get confused,’ Bedelia says, to which Will audibly snorts.

‘Oh, *please*.’ Without looking round, glaring his wrath into the dining area of the apartment – *a dining area I’ve dreamed about eating in* – Will adds, ‘You need to get over yourself; whatever *self* that is, Bedelia.’

I remember living here… Hannibal and I had sex on that rug… Against the pillar… The kids slept in the room off the hall… How is that possible? How are we still sharing the same dreams when we’re no longer bonded?

Bedelia sits forward, blearily insisting,

‘My name is Lydia Fell.’

‘Uh-huh.’ Will huffs a bitter chuckle and turns to face her. ‘You expect us to believe that you somehow *lost* yourself in the *hot darkness* of Hannibal Lecter’s mind?’ He wanders closer as he speaks, and stares down, dispassionate and disbelieving, at the drugged Alpha. ‘That Lydia Fell is some… construct?’

Hannibal would never do that to you… He doesn’t care enough about you. And besides, if the dreams I’ve had are any indication, you were a willing accomplice to most of the murders he committed here.

Jack Crawford holds out his cell phone, showing the stupefied Alpha the screen. On it is her own photograph, her name, in big, bold letters, a description and the words “Missing Person”.

‘It’s you, isn’t it?’ he says, and Bedelia’s golden eyebrows crease into a frown.

‘Well,’ she mumbles, rolling her head from side to side. ‘Now I’m *really* confused.’

Will grimaces in pain and, baring his teeth in a vicious smile, leans in close to whisper,

‘I. Don’t. *Believe.* You.’

Bedelia eyes him warily, her pupils blown wide and fixed, the irises a murky, muddy red. Will shakes his head in disgust and moves away, his shadow slithering inside, coiling and twisting, eager to strike. He wants to hurt her; strangle her, beat her. Anything to punish her for laying hands on *his* Alpha, *his* partner. For running away and protecting Hannibal when he should have faced justice months ago for what he did.

He tried to kill my babies. For that, he deserves to suffer.

As Will moves away, Jack glares at the psychiatrist.

'*You* are *not* confused, Bedelia.'

Bedelia shakes her head.

'That is not my name,' she insists, slurring the letters. Jack snorts, but it is Will who speaks.

'You know who you are, *and* what you've done.' He resumes pacing, the itching, irrepressible urge to move, to chase, to hunt compelling him to action. Hidden in the pockets of his suit pants, he balls his hands into white-knuckled fists. 'And you know *exactly* how you're going to wiggle out of it.' He picks up a glass vial, inspecting the liquid inside. 'What *is* this, hm? Sedatives? Hypnotics? Ethanol, scopolamine, midazolam…?'

'The same cocktail Dr Lecter served Miriam Lass,' Jack guesses, and Bedelia looks towards him again, her reality blurring at the edges until all she sees is light and color. 'You've been freebasing your alibi,' the other Alpha says, and then, surprisingly, adds, 'And I'm not even mad at you.' He shakes his head. 'To tell the truth, I'm fairly impressed.'

'Mostly because… you're still *alive*,' Will adds, barely visible, now, at the boundary of her peripheral. 'When this fog of yours clears, I'd love to hear how you managed *that*.'

Bedelia turns her attention back to Jack; she is aware enough to know that Will has no further use for her.

'You say my husband murdered a Chief Investigator.' She shrugs. 'Where is the polizia? Shouldn't *they* be questioning me?'

As she speaks, Will uses Jack's distraction to slip away. He moves quietly, following a familiar path through to the master bedroom.

Their bed is there, standing proud in the middle of the room. The canopies are drawn back, the covers made. Will runs a palm along the silk-sewn quilt, his skin pebbling and a hot tingle running down his spine at the remembered feeling of Hannibal's hands on his body. Hannibal's lips against the nape of his neck, against his most sensitive parts… Hannibal's length inside him, knotting together, sealing them in place as they rode out the waves of orgasm…

It wasn't real. None of it was real. It was just his fantasy of us.

He knows where the Alpha is. He just needs to get their first.

***

Mason's Vicious Moray Eel glides through the water of her tank, always eyeing the glass above her for signs of movement to indicate her next feeding. A shadow falls across the surface; Margot comes to stand at the edge of the viewing circle, her hands clasped neatly before her, eyes thickly ringed with gold as she prepares to speak to her brother.

'I've made new friends in Italy,' she says,' injecting a confidence into her voice that she never truly feels when around the Beta. No matter his current condition, she cannot forget the years of abuse.

Besides, Mason still has autonomy. He has Cordell, and Margot has seen the way the other Beta looks at her.

'They're cleaning up and starting over,' she adds, thinking of the greedy, ambitious *Questura di Firenze* Chief of Police. 'So, all *you* need to concern yourself with now is what'll *happen* when Dr Lecter is in your hands.'

Mason's eyes gleam like of blue ice.

'You've worked *so* hard to give me what I want,' he croons, still evoking a sense of power and fear-induced authority from his place in the four-poster bed. 'It's only fair to talk about what *Margot* wants.' He pats the mattress beside him. 'Come sit on Santa's lap.'

Barely hiding a cringe, Margot nonetheless obeys her brother and approaches the bedridden Beta.

'You *know* what I want,' she says, coming to sit on the end of the mattress, on Mason's weakest side, where he can't reach out and grab for her.

Mason blinks and his eyebrows drawn into something resembling a look of pity. It's at odds, however, with the sharp, gleeful scent emanating from him, and Margot doesn't allow the spark of hope to kindle into more than a flicker.

'The biggest regret of my *life* is taking away your ability to create it,' the Beta lies, and Margot's breath catches at the memory of the trauma.

'Adoption is a nice thing to do,' she says, desperately moving the conversation forwards before her emotions betray her.

Mason scowls.

'No pedigree in buying a Chinese baby,' he retorts. 'They're cheaper than shoats.' He clicks his tongue and, ignoring Margot's flat, carefully schooled look of neutrality, continues, 'I wish I could give you a *Verger* baby. Our *own* baby, yours and mine. We could raise it together.'

Margot rolls her eyes.

‘The last time you said you wanted to have a baby,’ she reminds him, ‘you removed my uterus.’

‘In my defense,’ Mason protests, ‘you *weaponized* your uterus! You shouldn’t have been waving it around like a loaded pistol!’

‘I brought it on myself,’ Margot drawls, lifting her blazing golden eyes to the ceiling to hide the true depth of her fury and hatred towards her brother. Her Guardian. Her legal owner, for all intents and purposes.

‘As you so often *do, Margot*,’ Mason agrees, ignoring his sister’s sarcasm. When Margot frowns at him, he adds, ‘But there’s the possibility that I’m still packing *loads* of viable sperm.’ He quirks an eyebrow; the closest approximation his deformed face can get to a leer these days. ‘Stumbled across any *viable uteruses* lately, hm…?’

They both think of Dr Bloom, and Margot realizes, too late again, that her brother hasn’t missed the looks shared between her and the newly-presented Alpha.

He wants me to seduce Alana… So she will carry his child…

‘What are you up to, Mason?’ she asks, but her brother just quirks an eyebrow in lieu of a dismissive shrug.

‘I want us to have a *baby*, Margot,’ the Verger heir says. ‘I could be really good to a child. I could take parenting classes…’

Margot thinks of the dozens of lawsuits, buried or mysteriously dropped, against her brother, for his inappropriate behavior towards children of the state… She can’t think of anyone less suited to being a father.

Even Dr Lecter would be a better parent than Mason.

‘Let’s find a way, Margot.’ Mason turns his baby-blues on his sister, appealing to her gentle, sensitive Omegan nature. ‘Let’s find a way to be a *family* again.’

***

I wish I was here under different circumstances, Will thinks, limping across the palazzo towards the Uffizi Gallery. *With Hannibal and the twins, visiting Florence as a family.*

Not to kill his former Alpha.

He knows Hannibal is here. And he knows exactly *where* in the gallery he is.

On the third floor, where the still air is cool against his sore skin, Hannibal indulges himself in storing one last memory. He sits on the padded leather bench before *La Primavera*, his sketchbook open on his lap, pencil skating across the thick parchment paper to perfectly recreate the art in his own image.

The nymph, her hair flowing, a garland of flowers held in her mouth… Pale Zephyrus chasing her… Their faces are ones he knows. Bedelia and his own Omega.

Will.

He knows he's there before the scent reaches him. He's always known when Will is in the room with him. The air itself stands still, as if reality holds its breath in anticipation for the wicked delights concocted by his beloved's dark mind.

Hannibal.

It's really him. After all this time; all these long, lonely months…

Will enters the antechamber of the Renaissance Master's room and the world grinds to a halt. His heart stutters, slows and then skips a beat before pounding against the cage of his ribs. He smells antiseptic, chamomile and jasmine from the bath oils, and, very faintly, fresh blood from cuts not yet scabbed.

The Alpha sits before the Primavera, as casual as any tourist. But the tension in his shoulders, the stiffness of his back, belies the truth of his wounded state.

Will wants to grab him into a hug, to bury his nose in the crook of Hannibal's neck and never let him go. Drag his hands through ashen hair and plunder his mouthy until those lips are no longer thin and cruel but red and swollen with affection.

At the same time, he wants to hurt him. He wants so badly to drive a knife through the twisted black heart inside the man who murdered Abigail. The Alpha who Bonded him, betrayed him… Who Cut him and left him to die.

The man who tried to murder my children.

It's a heady mix, simmering beneath an all-encompassing sense of finality. Of completion. Will moves closer, giving Hannibal time to sense him. Giving him warning and a chance to look up before he takes a seat on the bench beside him.

They're together again. At last. And whatever happens now, they'll face it together.

Hannibal raises his eyes to the Omega, curious as to the innumerable emotions he senses within his mind. His physical response is acute; his pulse has quickened, his senses heightened, his muscles bunched in anticipation of a fight or a need to protect his Omega.

But Will is no longer *his* Omega. The change in his beloved's scent confirms that. Where Will had once carried his smoky, cedarwood tang, now there is only salt and woods. Will's scent is not the sweet innocence it once was, but it is fresher than any bonded Omega's could ever be.

Wiped clean by a single cut. All of our time together, erased.

But not forgotten.

Will lowers himself to the seat with a pained sigh. His face is a mess of cuts and bruises; his eyebrow is swollen and he holds himself with the carefulness of a man nursing broken ribs. Hannibal watches him carefully, drinking in the sight of him, and he does nothing to keep the smile from tugging at his mouth.

I still love you, he thinks, basking in the aesthetic beauty of the creature before him. *I will cherish that, if nothing else.*

Will glances at Hannibal and then at the painting, humming a soft sound of approval. He's only seen it in Hannibal's memory and on a postcard but the real thing is exquisite. He understands why the Alpha wants to recreate this in his Memory Palace.

I'm so glad you're here, Hannibal thinks, a sharp ache near-splitting his heart in two. *I wish you'd come with me sooner.*

He cannot begin to express the true depth of his feelings – he can barely comprehend the startling sense of regret he feels at what he did to this perfect man – but he wants Will to know a little of his affection.

'If I saw you every day, forever, Will…' He looks again, marveling at the creation beside him. 'I would remember this time.'

Because you came to find me. And I let you.

Will looks up again and chuckles. For Hannibal, that was as much a declaration of love as a knife to the Crest.

You're just too damaged to be in a relationship, he thinks, his gaze softening as he takes in the state of the other man's wounds. *You're too dangerous to be allowed to live free. And I can't have you loose out there in the world. But I can't stand to think of you caged.*

'Strange,' he murmurs, feeling his irises prickle gold in response to the Alphan red staring back at him. 'Seeing you here in front of me…' He swallows and frowns, shaking his head at his own folly. 'I've been staring at after-images of you in places you haven't been in years.'

He returns to staring at the Primavera, worried he'll do something rash if he doesn't tear his gaze away.

Hannibal mimics him, tapping his finger on the abandoned drawing as he says, softly,

'"To market, to market, to buy a fat pig. Home again, home again… Jiggity jig".'

Pain slices through Will's abdomen, leaving his scar tingling as much as the smooth skin on the nape of his neck.

Home.

He's never felt as at home as he did when he was with Hannibal. What *is* home, really? A building? A city? Or a person with whom to share a life?

My home is with my children. It has to be. He made that choice for us.

It doesn't help that he can imagine Hannibal singing the same nursery rhyme to Danny or Gracie…

He killed Inspector Pazzi. He killed an Omega. I can't trust him to keep our family safe.

Raising his eyes to the ceiling, he speaks in a voice so low it's barely more than a whisper.

'I looked up at the night sky there. Orion above the horizon and, near it, Jupiter.' He sighs. 'I wondered if you could see it, too. I wondered if our stars were the same.'

Hannibal smiles again, glancing at his former mate and then back at the Botticelli.

'I believe some of our stars will always be the same,' he replies. 'You entered the foyer of my mind and stumbled down the hall of my beginnings.'

'I wanted to understand you,' Will says, throat tight around a lump. '… Before I laid eyes on you again. I needed it to be… clear. What I was seeing.'

A boy. Broken by what rabid Alphas did to him. A man too far removed from his mental illness to ever be a father. To ever be a good mate.

A wild beast, that needs to be put down.

No matter how much I still love him.

Hannibal studies Will, even as Will pours his emotion into his eyes. The conflict. The terror. The hurt and the lingering love.

But Will cannot forgive him. Will understands, but his understanding his led to pity, not acceptance.

I forgive you, Will.

'Where does the difference between the past and the future come from?' he asks, thinking of the night Mischa died. The night Abigail died.

The night their baby died.

'Mine?' Will shakes his head. 'Before *you* and after *you*.' He dips his head closer. 'Yours?' He shrugs and looks away. 'It's all starting to blur.' He snorts softly. 'Mischa? Abigail…? Chiyoh?'

Hannibal will always relive what was done to her. With every kill, every bite, he keeps Mischa's memory alive. And that means he never moves out of the past. He keeps the cycle of pain alive, trapping remnants of his dead sister in anyone else he cares about.

You'd do the same to our children. I can't allow that.

Hannibal is quiet, considering the damning conclusion his former Omega has come to. Then, before the serpent can unwind from its cavern deep inside the recesses of his mind, slithering to the surface to threaten the stability he so desperately needs, he says, casually,

'How *is* Chiyoh?'

The distraction works. The waters are once again still and calm, hiding the monster resting in the depths, and Will lifts one shoulder in a thoughtful hum before replying,

'She pushed me off a train.'

Hannibal snorts. She always was feisty. And deeply protective of him.

'Atta girl,' he murmurs, and Will chuckles before grief cuts it off in a sharp stab. He clenches his teeth and screws his eyes tight shut, working hard to keep tears from spilling. Focusing on breathing through the cramps slicing his gut to shreds, he only speaks when he thinks his voice won't wobble.

'*You* and *I* have… begun to blur,' he whispers, hating the confession but needing the truth to be known.

The bond may be severed, but what we shared is so much deeper than biology.

Hannibal smiles, and lowers his gaze to the drawing of his beloved on the paper before him.

'Isn't that how you found me?' he replies, thinking of his own dreams of Will. The pervasive need for his companion to be the Omega, not Bedelia. His instinctive knowledge of Will's location, true as the needle of a compass.

Will swallows, his face etched with suffering.

'Even as the *possibility* of free will dissipates,' he says, 'my experience of it remains the same. I continue to *feel* and *act* as though I have it.'

Hannibal lifts one shoulder in a small shrug.

'The worm that destroys you is the temptation to agree with your critics, to get their approval,' he says, and Will visibly shivers before replying, broken,

'Every crime of yours… feels like one *I'm* guilty of.' The Omega ducks his head, glancing up through his lashes to see if the Alpha is angry or disappointed in him. 'Not just Abigail's murder… *Every* murder. Stretching backward and forward in time.'

We were Pair Bonded. I no longer ended where you began. We were two halves of the same whole but now…? I'm not even that.

Hannibal studies Will, hating the pain and confusion on the younger man's face. Will is erotic when he is suffering, true, but this is beyond pain. This is the dissolution of his mind and Hannibal cannot tolerate that.

I will help you, Will. You cannot live with what I've done to you.

'Freeing yourself from me and… *me* freeing myself from *you*… They're the same.'

One of us has to die.

Will manages a weak smile, his golden eyes dull with exhaustion.

'We were *Pair Bonded*,' he says, sighing again before adding, 'I'm curious if either of us can… *survive* separation…?'

Perhaps they are simply delaying the inevitable. Perhaps they both died that night in the kitchen, when Hannibal took a knife to Will's crest.

Hannibal's eyes flicker crimson and then fade to maroon, his own mind pondering the same thing. This close, there are no edges to their thoughts; one flows to the other in an eternal stream of consciousness, carrying emotions too tangled to understand, too jarring to acknowledge.

'Now is the hardest test,' he murmurs, wanting desperately to take Will's hand between his own. To hold him close again, as he did before, he kiss away the pain. 'Not letting rage and frustration, nor *forgiveness*, keep you from thinking.'

The reminder is poignant, and more for himself than Will. He must *think* his way through this, if he is to survive.

If he surrenders to his emotions, then Will has won and he will be killed.

I'm sorry, mylimasis. I've come too far to let you destroy me.

At the Alpha's words, Will feels a rush of certainty. He has no idea if it comes from himself or the other man, but it strengthens his resolve. Hannibal knows why he is here; he knows the threat Will poses, and still he supports his decision.

They will try to kill each other. Whoever can think more clearly will win.

It's time.

Hannibal closes the sketchbook and gets to his feet, hiding most of his weakness. He doesn't want to give Will an advantage; the Omega is dangerous, and he must remain on guard.

'Shall we?' he asks, waiting for his partner without offering him his hand. Their accord is over, after all. They've said their goodbyes. Whatever happens now, it's every man for himself.

Will gets to his feet, hating the stiffness of his torn, tender muscles. He smells Hannibal's scent thicken, tinged with the heavy musk of Rut, and his own pulse quickens in response.

Their peace is done. Hannibal will kill him… Unless he gets the blade in first.

‘After *you*,’ he says, daring the Alpha to turn his back on him. To lead the way to his own death, just as he has led so many victims to their graves.

Hannibal smiles, knowing what Will is doing. It doesn’t matter. What he needs isn’t here. And Will won’t attack until they’re outside.

His knows his Omega better than Will knows himself.

He leads the way, limping as little as he can, Will falling into place at his side. They attract the odd look; two bruised, beaten men leaving an art gallery, but the nuns in their starched white veils merely incline their heads towards the Alpha and his presumed Omega. The street vendors at their carts don’t pay them any attention, and soon they are crossing the cobbled square of the palazzo, headed for the city, savoring the cool evening air.

High above, nestled amongst the terracotta tiles of the apartment buildings surrounding the square, Chiyoh readies her gun. She keeps the scope trained on the two men approaching below, the crosshairs sliding across Hannibal’s battered face to focus on Will’s.

She won’t allow him to kill her Guardian. He’s the only Alpha she’s ever cared for.

She sees the moment they both pull a Harpy knife from their pockets. Their movements are eerily synchronized; precise and equal.

She sees when Will tenses to strike.

One squeeze on the trigger and the bullet leaves the silencer before Will can even raise his arm.

Now.

Will feels the moment when the line of fate pulls taut. He dips his hand into his right pocket, fingers closing around the handle of the blade, pulling it free, ready to strike.

There’s a thwap of air, lifting his hair back from his face. Then an impact, like a boulder against his shoulder. The pain comes only when he lands on his back, knocked from his feet by the force of the shot.

On the rooftop, Chiyoh sighs at what she had to do to her fellow Omega. She unscrews the silencer of the rifle and begins to pack it away, ready for the next message from Hannibal.

She’ll leave Will to the mercy of his Alpha.

***

Sex as an Alpha is completely different than as a Beta.

As Alana pins Margot up against the bedroom wall, she realizes just *how* much she’s changed since the attack altered her physiology. She wraps her hands around the Omega’s wrists, holding her arms to either side of her head and slides her knee between the other woman’s legs, forcing them apart so she can rock against the heat above her thighs.

Margot whimpers, tilting her chin up and to the side in submission. At the sight of a pale throat, throbbing with a wild pulse and smelling so sweetly of Omega scent, Alana hears her own snarl as she buries her face in the soft skin.

'Are you sure you want this?' she whispers, nibbling a trail of goosebumps across the younger woman's neck, across her jaw until she can kiss her lips again. 'We're not moving too fast?'

'Not fast enough,' Margot replies, arching her spine to press her breasts against Alana's. There are too many clothes separating their bodies; she may never experience Heat again, since Mason rendered her infertile, but she still has a sex drive and she's been seducing the Alpha since she got here.

'I've never done anything like this before,' Alana admits, releasing Margot's wrists to fumble at the silk belt of her dress. 'Not since…'

'Your body knows what to do,' Margot promises, her own fingers unbuttoning Alana's blouse and pushing it, still trapped inside the suit jacket, off her shoulders. 'And so do I.'

'You've…?' Alana loses her train of thought and feels her eyes prickle red as Margot's slim body is revealed from beneath the dress. The Omega's stomach is toned and flat, smooth but for the scars littering her sides. The worst is the smile across her belly; evidence of the hysterectomy.

'Once,' Margot says, reaching for Alana's zipper. 'She was a Beta. We were going to run away together but…' She lets the sentence drift away, not wanting to revisit old memories. Mason's jealousy had been nothing compared to her father's fury at a low-bred Beta *nobody* fucking his daughter. Polluting her and daring to make her feel like a person. Someone of value.

'Come here,' Alana says, gathering the trembling Omega in her arms. She holds Margot close, drawing her in for a long, hungry kiss. By the time they part again their eyes are bright, their cheeks flushed and minds focused.

Margot drapes her dress over the back of a chair and kicks off her stilettos. Without the six-inch heels she's much shorter than the Alpha, especially since Alana has yet to remove her heels. She tilts her head up again, purring soft encouragement as warm hands cup the padded front of her bra, gently massaging the breasts inside before slipping around to unclasp the strap at the back.

'I've wanted you since the day we met,' Alana breathes, dipping her head to kiss each of Margot's pert brown nipples. 'You're the most beautiful creature I've ever seen.'

'You should have seen me before,' Margot jokes, and Alana frowns before kissing her again. She kicks off her own shoes, losing a couple of inches but still taller, and shimmies out of her pants, kicking them away to stand in only her underwear.

'You're perfect,' she says, crimson eyes locked onto gold. 'Just as you are now.'

Margot's cheeks flush a beautiful shade of pink and Alana grins. She maneuvers them until Margot's knees are against the edge of the bed and then pushes, adrenaline surging through her as the Omega falls willingly to spread before her.

'I want to taste you,' Alana adds, licking her lips as she takes in every inch of the prone, willing body beneath her. 'All of you.'

'Don't bite,' Margot warns, but there's no strength to her voice. 'Mason won't let you Bond me.'

Alana crawls onto the bed to kneel over her, both protective and possessive. She nudges Margot's jaw up, nuzzling her throat again, and purrs to reassure before growling,

'*Mason* can't stop me doing *anything*.'

Margot shivers, pulling her knees up and splaying her thighs as wide apart as she can. She arches again, a universal sign of eager surrender, and wraps her arms around Alana's shoulders, hugging her as close as they can get.

'But I'll only do what *you* want me to do,' Alana promises, and resumes kissing the purring Omega. She can feel the ache between her legs, stronger than ever before, and she rocks her hips more than she ever used to. Hooking a finger under the waistband of Margot's panties, she drags them down until the Omega helps kick them off and then covers the blazing heat of her with the flat of her palm.

Margot whimpers softly, her slick-sweet scent rising between them. Alana's musk is thicker, richer, since the change; she carries a scent of roses and something deeper, more primal. She's a wild blossom, sharp with thorns.

Alana rubs the hot wetness of the Omega, gently at first and then applying a little more pressure. Margot responds with another shiver and a playful moan, hands dropping to the lacy bra hiding fuller Alpha breasts from her.

'May I?' Margot asks, already moving the fabric aside to cup the heavy flesh. She circles the nipple, pinching gently, and pleasure zings down Alana's body, stoking the fire in her groin.

'May *I?'* the Alpha replies, lining up her fingers but waiting for permission. As soon as Margot nods she slides them inside her body, crooking the knuckles and rubbing against the smooth flesh, pulling down until she feels the telltale ridges of increasing pleasure.

'*Ohhh*…' Margot's eyes flutter shut and she bucks into the touch, chasing the first sparks of something better. Something she hasn't felt in a very long time. 'Oh, you're *good* at that.'

'Touch me,' Alana says, adjusting her weight so her hips are higher, giving Margot room to slide her arm down between them. 'Feel how wet you make me.'

'Why, Dr Bloom, I didn't know you were so crude,' Margot teases, gasping a breathless chuckle at the waves of arousal sweeping through her with every stroke of confident fingers. They kiss again, sharing breath and spit, and she snakes her hand down until she feels the

damp silk of Alana's knickers. The Alpha rolls her hips again, thrusting into the touch, and Margot gets her thumb against the sensitive hood of her clit, adding an extra zing with every rock.

'When I come,' Alana says, speaking between sucking livid bruises into Margot's throat, 'I'm going to want to bite you. You need to stay on your back if you don't want me to Bond you.'

Margot nods and latches her own teeth into Alana's neck, ignoring the tumbling brown curls covering her face. She suckles hard but lets go when the Alpha pulls back, grinning up with bloody teeth at the ring of dents in the blushing flesh.

'I wanted to taste you, too,' she says, her honeyed eyes sparkling. Alana narrows her own, irises blazing red, and then dominates her with another kiss, fingers pumping in and out of her fast now, building a rapid rhythm that has Margot bucking up into the movement, frantic for more.

'Touch yourself,' the Alpha orders, and Margot is quick to obey, rubbing circles on her clit with her free hand. Alana continues to fuck her fast with her fingers, her own hips grinding at the same speed, and Margot growls her frustration at the silk still between her hand and the other woman's most intimate part.

'I want to be inside you,' she begs, hair sticking to the sweat on her forehead, chest heaving and a blush spreading across her collarbones as climax draws near. 'God, Alana, *please!'*

Alana snarls, furious at the distraction. She pulls her fingers out, just for a moment, and grabs her panties at the side, wrenching hard enough to tear the seams.

'In,' she growls, and they both plunge their fingers inside each other's body at the same time. Shudders bring them closer, hair mixing in two shades of brown, red eyes fixed on gold, the air between their mouths growing hot and damp as they pant their way towards completion.

'There,' Margot whispers, grinding down and then up against the Alpha's fingers, her muscles tightening as she prepares to come. 'There, *there*, there…!'

'I'm coming,' Alana gasps, and she bears down, hard, against Margot's fingers, spilling wet into the cup of her palm. 'Move your hand.'

She pulls out of the Omega again, ignoring the frantic cry as she interrupts the building crescendo. Scooping the wetness from Margot's hand, she coats her fingers in the pearly fluid and then enters her partner again, fucking her hard and fast until Margot peaks.

The Omega jerks, her whole body going rigid with climax. Alana fucks through the vice-like muscles locking her hand in place, pushing her seed as deep inside the Omega as she can. It doesn't matter than Margot is barren; her instincts demand that she fills her, and she forms a seal with the rest of her palm as Margot's muscles lock them in place, a wobbling cry wrenched from the Omega's throat at the intensity of the second orgasm.

‘*Mine*,’ Alana snarls, and then she strikes. She bites down, hard, into the side of Margot’s neck, her fangs sinking deep. Margot convulses, tears flowing and voice breaking at the third and final climax, her thighs snapping shut around Alana’s arm and hip, hugging her close.

‘Yours,’ she promises, kissing her blood from the Alpha’s lips as soon as Alana is done claiming her. It’s not a Bond, not yet, but it’s a mark of ownership and she loves it.

***

They spend the rest of the morning in bed together, and by the time they’ve finished making love, Margot’s neck is collared with Alana’s bitemarks.

They redress separately, though Alana watches Margot closely as the Omega shrugs back into her wraparound dress. There’s a possessive gleam in her eyes, an appreciative smile on her freshly painted lips, and Margot ducks her chin with a demure, pleased little grin.

It’s nice being the object of an Alpha’s undivided attention.

‘Owing to eighteen months of relentless effort, access to confidential federal files, no international restrictions and large expenditures of money, Mason’s ahead of the FBI in the pursuit of Hannibal Lecter,’ Alana says, returning to their earlier conversation, which they had abandoned in favor of more pleasurable activities.

Margot rolls her eyes.

‘Mason has no *intention* of ever sharing his lead with the FBI,’ she replies, fumbling with the belt to secure her dress.

Alana rises and comes to help, saying, as she does,

‘I do… Once he has Hannibal.’

Margot smiles, enjoying the little ways in which Alana cares for her.

‘There’s something I need to get from Mason before he goes to prison,’ she says, and she feels Alana’s grip tighten on her belt at her brother’s mention, right before the Alpha deliberately tightens the bow and steps away.

Looking over her shoulder at the woman certain to Bond her, Margot adds, innocently,

‘Any experience harvesting sperm?’

We’ll be a family. You, me and our baby. But Mason isn’t a part of that. He never was, and he never will be.

***

In Florence, Inspector Benetti considers the drugged, vulnerable Alpha before him. Lydia Fell sits, balancing with an arm on the table, in a dining chair whilst the *polizia* search the

apartment. They are all his officers, and have recently been handsomely rewarded for their loyalty.

Mason Verger's lawyer in Geneva has ensured a smooth wireless transaction of several million US dollars to each account, in return for the swift, silent apprehension of Dr Fell.

They will do everything they can to ensure the bounty is collected before nightfall. This woman is the key to locating him. Inspector Benetti will do whatever it takes to make her talk.

Just as soon as he removes Jack Crawford, former Head of the Behavioral Science Unit at the FBI.

'We cannot locate Dr Fell,' he says, speaking before turning. When he does glance back at her, his eyes are thickly ringed with red and his expression is cold. 'Close attention has been brought to bear on him.' He moves closer, deceptively casual with a hand in his pocket, though his fist is closed around a knife, ready to use if he must. 'We have eyewitness accounts of a bloody figure, matching his description, running from the scene.'

He looks through the doorway to the bathroom, where two officers are taking blood samples from the edge of the ornate tub and the soiled bandages in the bin.

'The Italian public have already decided *Il Mostro* killed Rinaldo Pazzi.' He chuckles softly. 'A twenty-year-old-debt, finally paid.'

Jack looks up at the smooth, uncaring Alpha. He immediately dislikes him, and more so now for the callous way he refers to Pazzi's murder.

'The Italian public is right,' he says, to which Inspector Benetti narrows his eyes.

'*Il Mostro* died in prison,' the other Alpha says, and Jack looks away, knowing there's no use arguing with him.

He's nothing more than a pawn for Mason Verger. He has no desire to see justice done in the eyes of the law.

'Il Commendator Pazzi had been assigned to investigate to investigate the disappearance of two men from the Palazzo Capponi.'

Bedelia nods, feigning a naïve desire to assist the inspector.

'My husband knew Professor Sogliato,' she says, glancing at Jack as if seeking assurance. 'We were at his home many times.'

Jack narrows his eyes at her, but he says nothing. He vowed not to reveal her true identity, after all; in exchange for Hannibal Lecter's whereabouts. Now, he just needs to get out of this farcical interrogation so he can get to Lecter before Will does.

'We believe your husband was responsible for the disappearances, and *murdered* Pazzi when he came to same conclusion,' Inspector Benetti says, and Bedelia lifts a hand to her mouth in

numb shock.

‘If you haven’t already,’ Jack says, speaking directly to the police officer, ‘access the ViCAP database at Quantico. You’ll find Dr Fell on the “Most Wanted” page under the name of Hannibal Lecter.’ He ignores Bedelia, who continues to act, very unconvincingly, in his estimation, like this is all terrible news to her. ‘The fingerprints you’ll pull from Pazzi’s noose will be his.’

Inspector Benetti looks at Jack, narrowing his eyes with a knowing gleam.

‘If you knew Dr Fell to be Hannibal Lecter,’ he says, tilting his head as if wondering, ‘why didn’t *you* bring it to the attention of the Questura?’

‘He had a price on his head,’ Jack replies, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. ‘Pazzi knew about it; tried to sell him. That kind of money… I can’t blame him.’ He tilts his own head, quirking an eyebrow. ‘Can *you?’*

The look speaks volumes. Jack knows the Inspector is dirty, and Inspector Benetti knows that Jack knows.

They also both know there’s no proof, and no time to dance around the issue. Hannibal is already too close to slipping away.

The Inspector grits his teeth into an uncomfortable smile.

‘You’ve already been questioned regarding Rinaldo Pazzi’s murder,’ he says, making it abundantly clear from his tone that their discussion is over. ‘*Signor* Crawford. Since you’re not in Florence on official FBI business, that will be all.’

Jack waits, just a beat; a show of dominance over Inspector Benetti. Then, knowing he has no grounds to remain, and truly desperate to track down his errant Omegan companion, he gets to his feet.

Bedelia rises with him, but Inspector Benetti shakes his head at her.

‘Not you, Signora Fell.’ He smirks, and makes a show of removing his coat. ‘You stay *right* where you are.’ He sits down in the chair opposite her, and smiles coolly as Bedelia watches Jack exit the apartment, leaving her to her fate. ‘I have *so* many questions for you.’

***

When Will is shot, Hannibal’s first instinct is to cover him from further gunfire. It’s animalistic; a basic Alphan urge to protect an Omega.

His Omega.

But Will isn’t *his* Omega anymore, and he viciously quells the desire in favor of scooping the other man up and helping him back to his feet.

He needs to get Will somewhere private, quickly, before anyone notices what has happened.

‘Come on,’ he says, leaning down to collect both the fallen blade and the Omega. ‘Up you get.’

‘Wha’…? W’happened?’

Will is in shock, rapidly losing focus and strength. He’s in no position to fight, or flee, Hannibal holds him around the waist, draping Will’s arm around his shoulders, lending him his own strength.

‘Let’s get you cleaned up,’ he says, mouthing the word “Heat” to a passerby, who looks over in concerned confusion. It has the desired effect; the curious Beta blushes and turns away, not wanting to intrude on such a private moment between what he assumes is a bonded pair.

Hannibal takes the lead, pulling Will mercilessly through narrow back streets into the heart of the city. With every step, the bullet jostles the nerves in Will’s shoulder and agony rips through him. Sweat pours down his face and he bites his lower lip until he tastes copper, hating how much he needs Hannibal to remain upright.

‘Where are we going?’ he gasps, desperate to stop but unable to make Hannibal even slow. ‘Hannibal… Talk to me.’

‘Somewhere safe,’ Hannibal says, driving them on as the light fades and streetlamps flicker to life. ‘Somewhere private.’

That’s not safe, Will thinks, dragging his feet in a last bid to halt the Alpha. *Not for me.*

‘Nearly there,’ Hannibal says, jostling him just enough to make Will shudder in pain and forget about slowing down. ‘You’re doing fine, Will.’

He all but carries Will into the brass cage elevator of the apartment building, refusing to let go as they trundle up to the fourth floor. It is only once they are inside, and the front door is locked behind them, that he loosens his grip.

‘Here we go,’ he says, easing the other man down onto the couch. ‘Rest a moment.’

He leaves to remove his coat, fetch medical supplies and a glass of water, which Will gulps the moment the glass touches his lips. Blood has soaked through the Omega’s jacket, darkening the fabric to black, and Hannibal has smears of red across his palm and face from touching him.

‘This is going to hurt,’ Hannibal warns, kneeling before him. ‘But the bullet is still inside you.’

He moves quickly and deliberately, pushing Will’s jacket off his shoulders and down to his elbow. The movement wrenches a cry of pain from the Omega and Will can’t help but fall forwards, dizzy with the pulsing fire in his torso. Hannibal, to his horror, holds him close and, whether out of habit or maliciously, gives the nape of his neck a comforting squeeze.

The movement paralyzes and calms him, releasing a flood of endorphins strong enough to bring tears to his eyes and dull the pain of the gunshot.

At the rush of sugar-sweet pheromones from his former mate, Hannibal grimaces at his own idiocy and moves his palm to squeeze and rub Will's shoulder instead. His throat is clogged and there's a sharply uncomfortable pain in his gut at how *smooth* Will's neck is.

There isn't even a scar where I cut the crest off, he thinks, hating the Omegan biology hiding any evidence of their relationship. *Nothing physical, at least.*

Like so many of Will's scars, the lingering evidence is in his mind. A shattered psyche, prone to dreams that feel real.

Will buries his damp face in Hannibal's neck, hating the tears trickling down his cheeks. He hates how much he's *missed* the feeling of the Alpha's hands on him, even when hurting him, and he *loathes* the rush of calm as his body is tricked into trusting the other man.

Hannibal guides Will to sit back against the cushions and, as he reaches for a pair of scissors to cit away the stained shirt, explains,

'Chiyoh has always been very protective of me.' At Will's breathless, humorless chuckle, he glances up. 'Did she kill her tenant? Or did you?'

'She… she did,' Will manages, his breathing labored. The effect of the nuchal manipulation is wearing off and the pain is cold and bright, overwhelming him. It hurts more than the time Jack shot him because he's vulnerable in front of *Hannibal* again. The last time that happened, the last time he was wounded in the Alpha's presence, he almost lost his children.

'Excellent.' Hannibal smiles, proud of his protégé, and inspects the wound he has revealed. Then, after setting the scissors back on the tray of supplies, he presses the Harpy knife back into Will's hand.

Will smells his own spike of fear; salty and acidic. He looks down at the blade, the evidence of his second intent to betray his Alpha, and then at Hannibal, and the Alpha's ruby eyes glitter with a heady mix of cold indifference and blistering pride.

'You dropped your forgiveness, Will,' the Alpha says, and Will knows, if there was any doubt before, that he's going to die tonight.

Hannibal's going to eat him and there's *nothing* he can do about it.

Maybe there never was.

'You forgive how God forgives,' Hannibal continues, smiling at his beloved, seeing without watching as Will tries to force his numb fingers to close around the blade; tries to force his broken nerves to respond so he can strike before it's too late. 'Would you have done it quickly?' he asks, tilting his head curiously. 'Or would you have stopped to gloat?'

'Does God gloat?' Will hisses, vicious as panic rises like a tsunami within him. He watches as Hannibal smiles, one last time, and then the Alpha picks up a large syringe. Whatever it is, he doesn't want it, and shakes his head as desperate begging erupts from his lips. 'No, no, no, *no*…'

Ignoring the Omega's pleas, Hannibal injects the sedative into Will's armpit, straight into an artery. If Will still had his crest then a clamp would have been more effective, but without the raised scar tissue on the back of the neck the hinges won't work as well, and he won't risk Will struggling. He needs him to be still for what he's about to do.

The drug takes effect in moments. Will feels his head swim, as if he's been sucked under by a riptide, and he loses the feeling in his limbs. The knife slips from his unresponsive hand, caught and put away by the Alpha.

As Hannibal adjusts him to sink further back into the couch cushions, he leans closer and gazes, almost lovingly, into his eyes.

'Give that a moment.'

Please, Will thinks, even as darkness crowds the edges of his vision, tugging him down into its deadly embrace. *Please let me wake up from this. One last time.*

***

The bridge between their minds is a shadow, twisting and turning like black ink against a sea of white. It spills down, viscous as blood, smooth as smoke, to form antlers.

A great crown for the king of beasts.

Slowly, as if struggling to obey a command, the darkness becomes Will. The embodiment of his mind; his internal representation.

He wears one of the silk-lined, Omegan cut suits that Hannibal bought for him. His hair is combed back and his expression is cool. He looks… dangerous. Subtly powerful and in control.

After bringing a glass of wine to his mouth, taking a slow, luxurious sip, he hears his own voice, echoing across the void between their minds.

'I can almost taste the butter.'

His form intermingles with Hannibal; their heads conjoined as the darkness bleeds from one brain to the next. They are two halves of the same whole; no matter how far they run, or how hard they try to cut out the parts that make them bonded, on some level they will always be together.

'Taste and smell are the oldest senses,' Hannibal replies, and Will can hear the Alpha's voice by his ear, as real as if he were actually speaking in the room with him. 'And the closest to the center of the mind.'

It's not possible. I'm dead. He killed me… didn't he?

The dreamscape fades and Will becomes aware that there *is* butter melting before him, sizzling across an iron skillet on a small burner before him.

Returning to consciousness is an effort, like trudging through mud. The sedative is slow to wear off, dragging at his senses and dulling his thoughts until they blur as much as his mind's eye did with Hannibal.

'Parts that precede pity and morality,' he says, but it's not *him* saying it. Not really. It's his voice, echoing in the scaffolded chambers of his burgeoning Memory Palace, but they are Hannibal's words. *His* thoughts brought to life inside his brain.

You didn't cut that part out of me, can you?

The room returns to white again; a blank canvas on which to paint a picture of domestic bliss. Will, sitting at the head of the table, the honored guest and Hannibal; neatly dressed in a white suit, serving him.

This could have been our life. Our reality.

'They play in the dome of our skulls,' the Alpha says, adding seasoning to a porcelain bowl of sauce. 'Like miracles, illuminated on a church ceiling.' He smiles down at his mate, eyes warming to red as he admires the Omega before him. 'The ceremonies and sights, and exchanges of dinner, can be *far* more engaging than theatre.'

As he approaches, his façade darkens and the wendigo takes his place. Blank, soulless white eyes rip into Will's soul, icy tendrils reaching through his chest and squeezing his heart until it withers. Will shivers, fear sliding down his spine, numbing everything from the throat down and filling him with a keen sense that things are about to get much, much worse.

'What's for dinner?' he whispers, suspended in shadow above the wendigo's head; one branch of the razor antlers curving above its skull.

Hannibal, forming the other antler, his equal and partner in all things, smiles knowingly.

'Never ask,' he advises, his eyes red as blood on snow. 'It spoils the surprise.'

What surprise? What's happening…?

Opening his eyes is a challenge. Will feels as thought his eyelids are weighed down, fighting against his every effort to raise them. He stares at the table set for three before him, his vision blurred. He can't focus on anything and, when he tries to look around, his eyes don't follow the movement in time, causing a delay.

Where's Hannibal? He's sure he's here; he can still smell his scent, lingering in the air beside his head.

He tries to move but nothing responds. There's a terrifying numbness to his limbs, his torso… even his head… He's propped in the chair like a puppet whose strings have been cut and any movement could topple him.

Paralyzed… I've been paralyzed… Did he break my neck or just drug me?

Slowly, fading in and out of reality, Hannibal reappears, returning from the kitchen carrying a serving bowl. He sets it on the table beside Will's plate and, aware that the Omega is tilting and about to fall, steadies him by wrapping a thick belt around his waist, securing him to the back of the chair.

Then, taking the chair beside him, he takes a moment to consider his Omega, committing every detail of his face to memory, one last time.

As Will watches Hannibal watching him, he remembers what he said to the Alpha earlier.

We're conjoined.

Their faces blur, shift and then he's staring into his own reflection. He *is* Hannibal, wearing the same black turtleneck sweater as the Alpha, with the same cold, dangerous glint to his eye…

I know what you're going to do. I understand. You want to keep me with you, always, but we can't both survive this encounter, and the winner takes all.

This is the only way Hannibal knows how to honor him.

How to love him.

'I don't indulge much in regret but…' Hannibal sighs, clasping his hands on the table before him. 'I am sorry to be leaving Italy.'

To be losing you, my beloved.

'There are things in the Palazzo Capponi I would have liked to read.' As he speaks, he dips a spoon into the dish between them, scooping up some of the sauce inside. Blowing gently to cool it, he holds it to Will's lips and tilts, encouraging him to swallow despite Will trying to resist. 'I would have liked to play the clavier, or perhaps compose.' He sighs again, his chest aching with remorse. 'I would have liked to show you Florence, Will.'

I would have liked our child to be born here.

Will gulps back a whine, hating the pain coiling in his gut at the Alpha's confession. He holds on to the hatred, the fury, that he feels – *felt* – at the betrayal, Abigail's murder… Everything bad Hannibal has ever done, and manages to slur, sullenly,

'Soup isn't very good.'

Hannibal smiles, sniffing a chuckle at the valiant effort to remain angry, and shrugs an apology.

'It's a parsley and thyme infusion,' he explains. 'And more for *my* sake than yours.'

Will tries to look away; tries to move, to do *anything* but just *sit* there and let this happen to him, but despite his gasping efforts to make his body respond, nothing happens.

‘Have another sip,’ Hannibal says, briskly forcing another spoonful of the infusion into Will’s mouth, where self-preservation makes him swallow to avoid choking. ‘Let that circulate.’

Will, struggling to make out the shrinking, swaying, shaking end of the table, narrows his eyes to focus on the plate, cutlery and wineglass set for another guest.

‘Are we expecting company?’ he asks, and Hannibal purrs, softly.

‘Yes, my love.’ He hears the front door of the apartment open with a click and smiles.

And he’s right on time.

***

The apartment building where Professor Sogliato lived is old and luxurious. The entry board states that Sogliato lives in apartment 7b, at the top of the building.

Jack has just entered the elevator, closing the gate before him, when a young Asian Omega places a gloved hand on the bars. Acquiescing to her silent request, Jack closes the gate again and steps aside to give her a respectful distance. He notices her sharp glance towards the lit number seven, and smells the hint of salty fear before it is quickly suppressed.

Why is she nervous about him travelling to the seventh floor? And what is in the large, narrow suitcase she is carrying?

He doesn’t ask. Chasing Dr Lecter has made him paranoid, after all. She could just be a young Omega, unbonded, by the bright gold of her eyes, nervous about being alone in an elevator with an Alpha.

A reasonable assumption. And, if it’s anything more serious, he can defend himself.

They travel upwards in silence together, he on one side, she on the other. He studiously ignores the way she looks to the side, eyeing the gun in his pocket, and waits for her to step out of the elevator before him.

She’s with Hannibal. Of that, he’s sure.

He hangs back, waiting knowingly, and the Omega makes a show of ducking her head. She affects an air of bashfulness and hugs the rifle case closer to her chest.

‘Wrong floor,’ she lies, and takes the stairs, heading down. Jack watches her go, just until he’s sure she’s not about to turn around and come back up, and then picks the lock on Professor Sogliato’s apartment door.

To his surprise, and mounting suspicion, the door is already unlocked. It opens with a faint squeal of rusted hinges, and he brings his gun up, entering the lobby barrel-first.

Hannibal is here. Jack can smell the other Alpha’s scent, warm with Rut and spiced with glee at the game they’re playing.

He creeps, slowly and carefully, through the rooms of the apartment, following the sound of music. It grows louder as he approaches the dining room, and he steps from the shadows to see Will, beaten and bruised, his golden eyes hazy with drugs, strapped to the chair at the head of a table set for three.

A small pan sizzles with melting butter on a portable gas stove set on the side unit, ready to cook fresh meat at the table, but Jack has no idea where the other Alpha is hiding.

Instinct drives him to check on Will. The other man looks lost; blearily confused by whatever Hannibal has done to him, and he rolls his head to the side to look up when Jack touches his shoulder.

'Will…?'

'He… under the table, Jack.'

By the time Will's slurred words register, Hannibal has already struck. With vicious accuracy, he drags a blade across the back of Jack's ankle, severing the tendon and rendering his leg useless.

The pain is overwhelming, and Jack feels unconsciousness rush to overwhelm him. The last thing he sees, before his vision fades and his mind sinks into oblivion, is the cruel look of satisfaction on Hannibal's face.

You haven't won, he thinks. *Not yet.*

***

Back in the Fell's apartment overlooking the Arno River, Inspector Benetti smiles coldly at the drugged Alpha before him.

'Your husband left you behind,' he says, speaking in a soft, sibilant voice.

Bedelia Du Maurier, in an equally soft, deliberately gentle voice, replies simply,

'I had no reason to run.' She pauses, and then, as if reminding him, adds, 'I've done nothing wrong.'

'I hold in my hands,' Inspector Benetti replies, 'the photographs taken for Dr Fell's state work permit.' He opens the paper file before him and adds, as if an afterthought, 'Oh, I *also* have his French work papers…' Holding the file up, he shows the other Alpha the passport photograph of the real Dr Fell. 'Looks different with a beard… no?'

Bedelia affects a look of mild confusion.

'That is not my husband,' she says, eyes darting from the file to the Inspector's face. Inspector Benetti quirks an eyebrow, grudgingly impressed by her acting.

'This is Roman Fell,' he explains, setting the French document aside and holding the next page up to show a color-scan of Lydia Fell's passport. 'And *this* is Lydia Fell. His *Omega.'*

Bedelia dips his head, her blue eyes widening earnestly.

'*I* am Lydia Fell,' she says, making it sound like she's speaking lines. As if she's been coerced into believing a lie through sheer repetition and a cocktail of sedatives.

Inspector Benetti tilts his head at her, narrowing his eyes as the irises fill with red.

'Did you murder her with your husband?' he asks. 'Or did you just watch?'

'*I* am Lydia Fell,' Bedelia repeats, and the Inspector leans forwards, brushing the side of her thigh with his hand before gripping the edge of the seat on which she sits.

'I don't *care* who you are,' he confesses, invading her space as he grants her the final warning. 'I don't *care* if you're in your right mind or your wrong mind… Do you understand? Those things are *inconsequential*.'

Bedelia hears the threat perfectly clear, and says, very deliberately,

'*I* understand, in this moment, that you do not work for the Questura.'

Inspector Benetti smiles, his eyes glinting like rubies as he gives a single, subtle nod.

I'm working for Mason Verger, the nods says. *The man who just paid me one million dollars to deliver Hannibal Lecter into his possession.*

'That's a good thing to understand,' he whispers, and Bedelia nods her consent.

'I do not want to be seen as… *uncooperative*,' she says, and the Inspector shrugs.

'How you are seen is entirely up to you,' he replies. 'Rescued by the brave Questura, or…' He pauses, considering the options available to him. 'Apprehended?'

Bedelia feels her irises prickle as the red of her Alphan caste pushes through the haze of drugs, but she is quick to swallow back her anger at the way in which Inspector Benetti is treating her. She has been brainwashed to believe she's an Omega, after all. And these are dangerous waters she is navigating.

'I've never considered myself in need of being… *rescued*,' she says, adopting a soft, faltering voice and leaning forwards just enough to show her plunging cleavage, which Inspector Benetti quickly looks down at. '… Until now.'

I'll help you find Hannibal. And you'll help me escape this wretched mess.

Their accord is unspoken but crystal clear. They will each play their part; brave Inspector, befuddled, brainwashed woman and a criminal mastermind they both want to remove from Florence.

'Is your husband still in the city?' Inspector Benetti asks, slowly and deliberately. Bedelia chooses her words carefully, sifting through the fogged thoughts drifting through her mind with as much precision as she can muster.

‘My husband was hoping to meet someone before he left Florence,’ she says. ‘An old partner.’

‘Where?’ Benetti prompts, to which Bedelia inclines her head, inviting another degree of intimacy.

‘The *nature* of the meeting required privacy,’ she explains. ‘They will be somewhere *no-one* is supposed to be.’

She raises her eyebrows meaningfully, and Inspector Benetti sits back with a satisfied smirk.

Somewhere no-one is supposed to be… Like a dead man’s apartment.

Professor Sogliato’s flat.

‘Thank you, Mrs. Fell.’ The Inspector gets to his feet and beckons his officers closer. ‘We have him. Move out.’ He smiles down at her, sharp and pleased, and she smiles back in the same dazed way as before. ‘You’ve been very helpful. One of my officers will escort you to the Questura, where they’ll confirm your statement of capture and arrange for a flight back to the US.’

‘I do hope you find what you’re looking for,’ Bedelia says, rising and smoothing out the creases in her dress. ‘My husband can be… challenging… at times.’

And if he has Will, he’ll be more dangerous than ever. That man truly brings out the beast in him.

***

Jack is slow to wake, but when he does he finds himself strapped to a chair in the same manner as Will, facing the Omega from the length of the table.

Hannibal stands between them, stirring a pot of sauce and preparing cutlery for whatever monstrous dish he’s planning to make them eat.

‘I’ve taken the liberty of giving you something to help you relax,’ he says, once he sees former-Special Agent Crawford’s eyes open. ‘You won’t be able to do much more than chew but…’ He smiles. ‘That’s all you’ll need to do.’

Panic swells as Jack tries, and fails, to make his own body respond to him. He can just about move his head; slowly and with difficulty, but his arms, legs and torso may as well be someone else’s for the control he has over them.

All he can do is watch as Hannibal sets a freshly sharpened knife down on the table and moves towards the drugged, bound Omega at the other end of the table.

‘I didn’t have an opportunity to ask you during our last encounter,’ Hannibal continues, ‘but did you enjoy the exhibition?’

His words, and gentle, casual tone implies a dinner party between friends; utterly at odds with the truth of their hostage situation. Will's mind is slow to process the jarring nature of that fact, and Hannibal is already speaking again before he can think beyond the acknowledgement of it.

'A different kind of Evil Minds Museum.'

Jack tries to glare but his face isn't truly his own. He stares at the other Alpha, his eyes a dull, drugged red, feeling every one of his forty-nine years.

'Not that different,' he says, his voice weak with exhaustion.

It's over. He's failed. And now Will is lost to him – back in the clutches of a monster. Is Hannibal going to Bond him again? Are they going to eat him together?

Perhaps that's what Will wants. After all, he admitted to wanting to run away with his former Alpha. Maybe he asked for this, in the hours between him disappearing from the Fell's apartment and Jack arriving here.

Maybe he never intended to let Hannibal go. To kill him.

'We were supposed to sit down together at your house in Baltimore,' he says sadly, exhausted from the mind games and the fucked-up relationship between the two men opposite him. 'Just the three of us.'

'You were to be the guest of honor,' Hannibal replies, looking down as the memories of that night – of Will's heart-breaking betrayal – make his throat swell with emotion.

'But the menu was all wrong,' Will mumbles, grief pushing through the numbing haze. Grief for what happened; what could have been, and what is going to happen now.

At least the twins are safe with Pops. He'll take care of them. Raise them as he did me.

'Yes,' Hannibal says, giving Will's shoulder a quick, comforting squeeze. 'It was.'

He turns away, moving briskly before doubt can make him falter. He needs to do this. It's the only way he can release Will from his influence, whilst keeping the Omega close to him.

The only way he knows how to love.

He sets an ornate box on the table beside Will's place setting and lifts the lid, speaking as he does.

'Jack was the first to suggest getting inside your head.' As he speaks, he assembles a surgical bone saw. 'Now we both have the opportunity to chew, quite literally, what we've only chewed figuratively.'

God, no…

Will's horror at what his former mate is suggesting momentarily washes away the drug-fog. He still can't move, but his breathing becomes shallow and rapid and his eyes pulse gold with fear as the Alpha approaches him, the blade on the saw whizzing with deadly speed.

Hannibal, please… There are other ways of keeping with me with you.

He understands, with startling clarity, that the Alpha is doing this because he loves him. He still loves him; worships and adores him, but the affection is deadly. He wants to keep Will close to him, always, and the only way he knows how to honor him appropriately, to respect him as much as he deserves to be, is to eat the best part of him.

His mind.

'Hannibal.' Jack speaks, slowly and carefully, his voice weak from the paralytic coursing through his veins. '*Stop*.'

He's your mate. Your Omega. You don't want to do this.

'Stop!'

Ignoring him, Hannibal brings the saw up, closer and closer to Will's forehead. Then, very deliberately, he presses the spinning blade to his Omega's skin.

Will feels the vibration of the saw, tingling and tickling through his head despite the numbing sedative. His mind rebels against the reality of his situation; this can't really be happening. Hannibal isn't really doing this; he never does anything too damaging to him. He hurts him, breaks him, but he always puts him back together again.

They can't come back from this, so it can't be real.

Heedless of his desperate denial, there is the unmistakable, sickeningly high-pitched sound of metal slicing into flesh and bone. Blood begins to trickle down between Will's eyes, blinding him. The bone saw continues to scream, its madly-spinning, serrated blade chewing through his head.

Jack screams as well, but Will can't hear him. He can't hear anything but the saw and his own, rapid pulse. Blood sprays, droplets floating upwards like bubbles suspended over the table. In them, he sees himself, juddering and shaking as the saw deals its damage, Jack, fighting against invisible bonds and Hannibal, half-in shadow, the Wendigo guiding his hands.

The monster inside you, making you do something I know you'll regret.

The last thought, before consciousness chases him into darkness, is that he was right to let Hannibal believe the babies had died.

You'll never know what you could have had, he thinks, as the ceiling pulls away to reveal an endless sky of blue dotted with clouds. An oblivion of peace, with no more fear. *What we could have had. Together.*

***

In Maryland, USA, the towering trees of the Verger estate are laden with snow. The air is freezing, both inside the back of the chilled meat van and beyond the truck.

Chains clink as wheels bounce through ruts and catch on stones. The service road is uneven and dead pigs swing on their hooks, legs bound, tongues lolling, bodies wrapped in cellophane.

Slowly coming back to consciousness, wondering why he feels dizzy and sick, it takes Will several minutes to realize where he is.

Hanging upside down, battered on either side by pig carcasses, in a moving room that must be a vehicle.

Hannibal is beside him, serene and composed despite the same predicament. The Alpha's phase is ruddy with blood rushing to it, his blond hair hanging down from his head. Will's curls are plastered with sweat and blood, more of it on his face, staining his cheeks, clumping in his eyelashes… He can feel the gash on his forehead pulsing, stinging, a flap of skin moving as the van jerks to a stop.

There are footsteps, muffled voices and then the sound of a bolt being drawn back. The doors open and Will squints against the blinding light of the outside world.

He hears a motor, the crunch of approaching wheels and then a chillingly familiar voice, which tells him that things, as bad as they were in Florence, are about to get much, *much* worse.

'Gentlemen,' Mason Verger announces, his mutilated face unable to pull his mouth into a grin but his blue eyes blazing with glee at the sight of not one prize, but *two*. 'Welcome to Muskrat Farm.'

Digestivo

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal are tortured at Muskrat Farm, but Mason overplays his hand with Margot and her “surrogate”, with devastating consequences.

Hannibal learns about the twins.

Chapter Notes

Hey peeps! Oooosh, after a long wait, I do hope you enjoy this latest instalment. I certainly had a lot of fun writing it, though it was VERY emotional at the end. I hope I've captured the emotions alright...

Enjoy! I hope you're all staying as safe and well as you can xxx

SEVEN

Digestivo

Inspector Benetti and his men split up when they arrive at Sogliato’s apartment building. Two men take the stairs, and Benetti rides in the elevator with the others.

They storm the apartment without warning. Inspector Benetti brings up the rear, striding into the dining room to see Hannibal Lecter using a bone saw to cut into the skull of his former Omega.

‘Sono un ufficiale del FBI,’ Jack calls, the moment Hannibal switches off the bone saw and lowers the weapon from Will’s dented, bleeding forehead. ‘Ascoltami! Mi chiamo Jack Crawford! Sono un ufficiale del FBI!’

Will’s vision is blurred. Distorted. Jack’s face looks like a Picasso; wonky features shifting and sliding on top of one another.

Don’t think he got my brain… Not quite.

Not far off, though. The circular blade drips with ragged bits of flesh and blood.

‘Ascoltami,’ Jack says, pleading with them to listen to him. Just stop and *listen* for one moment. ‘*Ascoltami!’*

Inspector Benetti smirks down at him, confident in his control of the situation as Dr Lecter kneels on the floor, his hands behind his head.

Jack frowns up at him, defeated in the knowledge that the other Alpha isn’t here to deliver justice.

‘Commendatore Benetti,’ he says, sick with it all. ‘I don’t imagine you’re here to make an arrest.’

‘No,’ Inspector Benetti says, smiling beatifically. ‘You imagine correctly.’ He nods to one of his men, the brawny Alpha closest to Hannibal, who whacks the kneeling Alpha over the back of the head with the butt of his gun.

Hannibal drops, unconscious, to the floor, and the police officer binds his wrists and ankles with plastic cord ties.

‘Take Lecter and this one,’ Benetti says, nodding towards Will. ‘He’ll pay us double for both.’

One of the Beta officers pulls out a black sack from his belt and thrusts it over the Omega’s head, heedless of the bloody wound on his forehead. They unstrap him from the chair and cuff him with the same ties, depositing him on the floor beside Lecter.

Inspector Benetti smirks at Jack, his eyes glinting red.

‘There’s no price on *your* head, Signor Crawford,’ he says, and Jack sighs. He already knows where this is going. The story the Questura will spin.

‘So,’ he says, dread weighing him down as much as the paralytic. ‘Hannibal Lecter… *Il Mostro di Firenze*, narrowly escapes the Questura.’ Benetti’s men carry Will and Hannibal from the apartment, trusted to ensure the two captives to the unmarked van waiting in the alley at the back of the apartment building. ‘Is that how the story goes?’

Benetti holds his finger and thumb apart.

‘Missed him by *this* much,’ he confirms. ‘The good Dr Lecter is once more in the wind. But he left *one* last victim.’ He turns to the remaining Alpha in the room – the same brute that had bashed Lecter over the head. ‘Open him the way Lecter opened the other one,’ he says, eyes shining crimson with excitement when he turns back to Jack and purrs, ‘Open him all the way.’

He bids Jack farewell and leaves the room, committing the former FBI Agent to his fate at the hands of a cruelly-grinning Alpha, holding the bone saw with undisguised glee, and a Beta come up from behind to hold his head steady.

Jack closes his eyes, resigned to his fate. It’s going to hurt; the paralytic is numbing his body but he can feel everything in his head. It’s a cruel, torturous demise, worse than Hannibal had

planned for him.

And then –

Thwap. Thwap.

Two shots, muffled by a professional silencer, and the corrupt police officers fall to the floor. Jack jerks in his restraints and looks over to see a perfectly round hole in the window.

From the roof of the neighboring building, Chiyoh hums her satisfaction at the clean, concise shots.

Hannibal has been taken. She needs to know where.

It doesn't take long for her to enter Professor Sogliato's apartment. She enters slowly, rifle drawn in case Jack Crawford tries to attack. The other Alpha remains seated at the head of the table, just as he had been when the dead men had been about to saw open his head.

She sees that he recognizes her immediately. He smiles knowingly, his irises gleaming a dull red in the gloom.

'Wrong floor,' he says, and they share a moment of understanding. Of *knowing*. They are both hunters, predators in their own rights, but she has the power in this situation.

Jack lowers his gaze as a sign of respect, asking,

'Would you mind coming over here and pulling this needle out of my neck?'

Chiyoh doesn't move, doesn't lower the rifle.

'Where did they take them?' she demands, and Jack, recognizing the power-scope sniper rifle for what it is, glances down at each corpse cooling on the tiles.

'Did you do this?' he asks, and Chiyoh lifts one shoulder in a small, indifferent shrug.

'Of course.'

'I appreciate it,' Jack replies, and their understanding strengthens. Deepens. Solidifies.

Chiyoh sets the rifle down against the chair beside her.

'You're sitting at Hannibal's table,' she says, considering the drugged Alpha before her. 'You know him. You know Will.'

'I know them,' Jack confirms. 'They are identically different. Hannibal and Will.'

'*Where* did they take them?' Chiyoh repeats, and decides not to risk delaying answering her any further.

'They're most likely taking them to the US, to Maryland,' he says. 'I can even tell you the address…' He glances at the IV standing beside him. '… Once you've pulled this needle out

of my neck.'

And there it is. The only bargaining chip he has. He has information she wants. She has the autonomy of movement in her limbs.

Chiyoh narrows her eyes.

'Then what?' she asks, immediately suspicious. Jack tries to shrug but his shoulders don't respond.

'My "then what" consists of getting out of Florence alive,' he replies, thinking of the bribed Questura. 'Since I'm supposed to be dead.' He meets the Omega's gaze steadily and adds, 'Which puts me in no position to stop whatever it is you intend on starting.'

Chiyoh considers the request, considers her options, and then complies. She moves around to Jack's other side and rips the needle from his neck, not bothering to be gentle. The man has still be hunting her Alpha, after all, and he would have arrested Hannibal if he'd had the chance.

Jack winces at the pain, and at the feeing of blood trickling down his neck, but the relief is a sweet antidote as the paralyzing drug stops flowing into his system.

'Where?' Chiyoh demands, and Jack frowns up at her.

'Muskrat Farm,' he says. 'The Verger estate, near the Susquehanna River in northern Maryland.'

Chiyoh nods, still eyeing him coldly, and then moves to retrieve a handgun from the dead Alpha. She places it, very specifically, in front of Jack, promising him a means of defending himself on his way out of the city.

Then, shouldering the rifle, she leaves.

She has a long way to go, and she needs to hurry.

***

Will regains consciousness on the plane.

Hannibal watches as the Omega stirs, groans, and then tries to move. He feels the bite of his own restraints, the plastic cutting deep into his wrists, constricting the circulation until his fingers ache.

'Don't fight your bonds,' he murmurs, wishing, absurdly, that he could move closer to comfort his former mate. 'They'll only tighten.'

Will hears the words as if from a distance. His head is pounding, as painful as the time Hannibal had forced him to detox from Heat suppressants.

At least that was for my own good… In a twisted, demented sort of way.

‘Where’r’we?’ he mumbles, each word slurring into the next. ‘W’happened?’

The last thing he remembers is… The wendigo, its blank, white eyes boring into him as surely as the bone saw in its deadly grip… Razor-tipped antlers stretching towards the ceiling and Jack… Jack screaming for Hannibal to stop… To let him live, even as the blade chewed a dent into his skull.

‘We’ve been kidnapped,’ Hannibal says, his voice as calm and unperturbed as if discussing the weather. ‘Sold by the *Questura di Firenze* to Mason Verger. We’re on his private plane, right now. In the cargo hold, of course.’

‘Mason Verger?’ Will tries to lift his head but agony rips down his spine and he gives up with a gasping whimper. Hannibal’s scent thickens with the first hint of Rut and a monitor, attached via a sticky electrode to the Alpha’s throat, blips a warning.

A door opens, metal hinges squealing, and an Alpha guard comes into the hold. His nostrils are plugged with odor-repellant and he carries a cattle prod in one hand, a wicked-looking syringe in the other.

‘Time for your next shot, Dr Lecter,’ he says, and stabs the needle into Hannibal’s buttock. The plunger goes down and a fresh burst of Neutralizer shoots into his system, stifling his Alphan strength and dulling his senses.

Too many doses risks rendering him infertile, but Hannibal doubts Mason intends to breed him.

No, the mutilated Beta has been hunting him for the better part of a year, for the sole pleasure of torturing and killing him.

His dedication is to be commended.

‘Get th’fuck off him,’ Will growls, kicking with his bound legs. ‘M’gon’kill you.’

‘Shut up,’ the Alpha says, bringing the two prongs of the electric stick right up to Will’s face and pressing the button. Blue light zaps between the electrodes, crackling with static, and Will shrinks back even as his eyes flare gold with fear. The Alpha smirks and zaps it twice more, sniggering as the Omega flinches, before he is satisfied that both captives are once more under total control.

‘Thank you for stitching his wound,’ Hannibal says, drawing the guard’s attention with his polite, steady voice. ‘I watched your work. You have a steady hand.’

‘Had a lot of practice with assholes like your ‘Meg, here,’ the Alpha replies, turning to leer down at the bound man at his feet. ‘You’re a sick son-of-a-bitch, ain’t ya?’

‘It’s a pity your hand isn’t as steady when you play Poker,’ Hannibal continues, tossing his head to flick blood-crusted hair from his face so he can smirk up at the guard. ‘You may not have lost the last three rounds.’ At the guard’s deepening scowl, he adds, ‘Or, maybe you just

don’t have the balls for it. You know what they say, if you can’t play with the big boys, perhaps you should sit at the kiddies’ table.’

The Alpha snarls and jabs the cattle prod right into Hannibal’s midsection, sending a burst of five thousand volts into his stomach. When the Alpha doesn’t respond, he prods him again, harder, and then stumbles out of the cargo hold, muttering about crazy bastards getting what’s coming to them.

Once the door is locked, and they are alone, Will speaks. He tries to shift closer, battling through the pain of the motion, and manages to rest his bandaged head against Hannibal’s shoulder.

The Alpha’s gaze is distant; he has retreated into his Palace. Will can sense him there, savoring the beauty he so admires, free from pain and physical discomfort.

‘Stay inside,’ he whispers, nuzzling the Alpha’s bruised jawline to offer some small comfort. ‘Think of me as I was. As we were. But don’t worry about me.’

It’s going to be worse for you. If I can spare you that pain, I will.

***

Creamy skin gives way to puckered scar tissue and Margot whimpers softly when Alana kisses along the strip of red and silver. The Alpha hushes her, soothing her with deep purrs and a strong, steady hand over her thigh, promising continued devotion and affection no matter her appearance.

No matter her infertility.

‘You’re perfect,’ Alana whispers, laving her tongue across the hysterectomy scar and coating it with her spit to encourage continued healing. ‘My beautiful girl.’

‘Bond me,’ Margot begs, gazing down at the other woman between her legs, the back of her neck flushed and tingling with heat. Desperate to be bitten. ‘Please… I love you.’

‘I love you, too,’ Alana says, crawling back up the Omega’s body. ‘Since I first met you, I loved you.’

‘Mason can’t own me if you Bond me,’ Margot says, trying to pull Alana’s hand to her nape. ‘I’d become yours. Completely.’

Alana resists the urge to hold the Omega by her neck, knowing the rush of resulting pheromones would kick her own instincts into overdrive. She holds herself up above Margot, staring down into her gold-ringed eyes, feeling the heat of her against her thigh where she presses against the other woman.

‘Is that the only reason you want me to Bond you?’ she asks, trying not to let disappointment color her voice. ‘So that your legal guardianship will pass from Mason to me?’

‘No, I…’ Margot reaches up and cups the side of Alana’s face, stroking her cheek with her thumb. ‘I want you to Bond me because I want to *be* with you. Always. I want to be yours.’ She sighs. ‘Transferring my legal guardianship would just be… An added bonus.’

‘Your brother doesn’t deserve you,’ Alana replies, and they both think of the scar across the Omega’s midsection. ‘He doesn’t deserve any of this.’

‘If you Bonded me, you could challenge him to the Verger estate,’ Margot says, arching her back in a subtle but provocative movement that rubbed her against Alana’s skin. ‘The will was very specific… In the absence of a male or Alphan heir… But as my Alpha you would *become* the legitimate Alpha of the family… Mason would have no choice but to surrender to you.’

Alana scoffs and rolls her crimson-ringed eyes.

‘You think Mason will ever surrender to anyone?’ she asks, rocking her hips down into the Omega’s small but persistent pleas for intimacy. ‘The only way he’ll pass up the Verger fortune is if he’s dead.’

Margot tilts her head back, baring the smooth column of her throat and inviting Alana to suckle at it with a high, quavering whine. The invitation is clear – Bond her, claim her, kill Mason.

‘Together,’ Alana says, and she uses a hand under Margot’s back to flip the Omega into the classing mating position, exposing the back of her neck for biting. ‘We’ll kill him together.’

‘Please,’ Margot whispers, canting her hips and pulling her hair to the side. ‘*Please*, Alana.’

Alana growls, low and feral, and her eyes pulse red at the resulting shudder wracking the Omega. She bows low over the other woman, bracing her weight on one hand as she plunges two fingers of the other deep inside Margot’s body, crooking them down and rubbing against the sensitive flesh inside as she sinks her teeth into the skin of her neck.

Margot keens, long and high, clenching tight around the Alpha’s digits and juddering as orgasm rips through her. She presses up into the bite, back onto the fingers, and spasms at the relentless waves of pleasure.

Alana shivers, rocking her hips to rub against the back of Margot’s thigh and coming, hard, at the smell and sound of the Omega clamped between her teeth. She bites harder, drooling at the taste of sweet, coppery blood, and laps at the torn edges of the wound even as deep purrs rattle up from her chest.

No wonder Alphas were so protective of Omegas. She’d never felt pleasure like this before. Never felt such a sense of *completeness* and devotion to another being.

‘Mine,’ she whispers, pressing a damp kiss to the raw bitemark and holding Margot to her as they collapse onto the mattress, sweaty and shaking and spent.

***

Some time later, once Margot's body has relaxed enough to release Alana's fingers, and the bite on the back of her neck has begun to heal into a ridged crest, she takes a call on her cell phone.

'Pronto,' she says, greeting the caller in Italian.

'Buongiorno, *signorina*.' Inspector Benetti of the *Questura* di Firenze allows a little hunger to color his tone; Margot Verger is, after all, an available Omega. Her brother may reward his efforts with more than just money. 'I have good news.'

'Dimmi tutto,' Margot demands, and Inspector Benetti smiles. She wants to know everything; he's more than happy to oblige.

As Margot listens to the man on the other end of the line, humming every so often, Alana rolls onto her back with a sigh. The black silk sheets of the Omega's bed are warm, and carry their mingled scents. Jasmine and rose; sugar and smoke.

Mine.

It's all coming together. Hannibal has been captured by Mason's men in Italy, and he'll be brought here, to Muskrat Farm, to be tortured and killed.

Mason will be distracted; the perfect opportunity to get Margot to safety.

Outside, the full moon casts a sickly pale glow over the landscape, and Alana shivers at the imagined sight of Hannibal's face in the shadows of the branches near the window.

Be blind, Alana. Don't be brave.

Bravery would mean fighting Mason. Using her newfound Alphan strength to defeat him honorably. To fight for her Omega and solidify her claim by defeating another suitor.

The last time she was brave, she was thrown from a window and shattered almost every bone in her body. She underwent a trauma so profound that her latent Alpha genes activated as a means of saving her life.

Hannibal deserves what he gets from Mason.

'Mason's men picked Hannibal up at an apartment less than an hour ago,' Margot says, placing the cell phone back onto the bedside table and rolling back into Alana's embrace. 'He's on his way to the airport, where he'll be flown back to America on one of the Verger jets. Mason will have him driven here with the next shipment of pig carcasses.'

'How long is the flight?' Alana asks, pushing Margot's silky hair back from her face and cupping her cheek tenderly. The Omega purrs, just once, and smiles into the touch, appreciating the intimacy.

'A little over seventeen hours,' she replies, and giggles as Alana suddenly pins her with a fierce, hungry kiss.

‘Then we have plenty of time to fuck,’ the Alpha growls, plunging two fingers back inside her mate’s slick, eager body. ‘I want to hear you scream my name again.’

***

The next morning, Alana watches from their bedroom window as the distant truck carrying Mason's precious cargo draws ever closer, growing from a tiny speck of white against the treeline as it makes its way along the bumpy service roads of the estate.

'Mason has what he wants,' she says, imagining Hannibal, bound and gagged inside the van, surrounded by the carcasses of animals he felt he was too good to eat. 'It's time you get what *you* want.'

'Mason has Hannibal,' Margot confirms, coming to stand beside her Alpha and gazing down at the truck. She sighs, the cell phone heavy in her hand as she thinks of the call just received from Mason's team at the airport. 'He also has Will.'

If Alana is distressed by this, she doesn't show it. Her eyes barely register the shock, just a brief flicker of red before they fade back to blue, and Margot smells concern, quickly suppressed.

'Your brother's a sadist,' Alana says, returning her sharp, thoughtful gaze to the window. 'He'll torture them both and take the time to enjoy it.' She looks at her Omega, affection warming her gaze. 'That gives *us* time.'

Her intention is clear. She may not like the idea of Will, another Omega, being hurt, but if it's a choice between him and Margot?

Her mate will always come first.

***

By the time they arrive at Muskrat Farm, Will wishes he'd remained unconscious for the journey. The chilled truck, with its delivery of captured men and dead pigs, takes every service road from the airfield to the house, wheels bumping through ruts and over stones, jostling them where they hang, suspended upside down, dangling from meat hooks through the cords binding their ankles.

Every move sends them lurching either into each other or against the hard metal of the walls, and Will's head swims even as his limbs ache with lack of blood flow. His crude stitches throb with every beat of his stubborn heart and the cold air makes the dried blood on his face crack and itch.

When the doors finally open, and a chillingly familiar, nasal voice calls out to them, remaining unconscious seems even more appealing.

‘Gentlemen,’ Mason Verger croons, using the joystick on his electric wheelchair to roll closer to the van. ‘Welcome to Muskrat Farm.’

He's been waiting for them since receiving the call that the jet had landed. There's a hush over the Farm, like the quiet of the old Sabbath. He's told Cordell this, of course. It smells like salvation.

Like blood.

The driver reverses the truck to the very edge of the loading dock and lowers the ramp, allowing Mason to wheel his chair directly into the back of the chilled van where his prizes hang by their ankles.

Dr Lecter is dressed in dirty, rumpled black clothes, his red-ringed eyes dull with Neutralizing drugs. It's imperative that he remains in a stupor until he's secured in the appropriate bonds; an Alpha as strong as Lecter needs careful managing.

His whore of an Omega hangs beside him, white shirt spattered with blood, swollen face smeared with red and golden eyes glassy. Will Graham was never an intended target, but Mason isn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth, and this way his fun has just doubled.

'Your people might have assassinated me in Florence, Mason,' Hannibal says, somehow managing to make it sound like a mildly curious comment, rather than a desperate plea to know why he and Will have been kidnapped.

Mason smirks at him, power slithering through his veins like the great eel in his bedroom tank.

'Where's the fun in that?' he replies, sneering down at his prey. He enjoys seeing the Alpha bound and hanging like this; so much more satisfying than beating children. An Alpha is a worthy opponent, and having one such as *Lecter* beaten and subdued is *sublime*.

He pulls the ivory-handled knife free from his coat sleeve, saying, as he does,

'I still keep my father's knife, ever ready to slip into a pig's back to check the depth of the *fat*. Cordell, if you would?'

The fat, bald, Beta nurse behind him steps forward and, smiling cruelly, spins Hannibal slowly around so that his backside is level with Mason's hand.

Mason croons his pleasure and slides the knife, inch by painful inch, into Hannibal's flank. Will watches, dimly wondering if any of this nightmare can be real, his heart lurching and stomach twisting as his Alpha is wounded.

Hannibal, however, merely blinks at the assault. He chooses not to feel the pain; he turns his attention inwards once again and sits beside a lake, listening to the drone of bees and the chirrup of birds, slim fingers plucking the strings of a Japanese lute.

Mason huffs his disappointment at Dr Lecter's lack of response. The man's stoicism is grating, but there's all the time in the world to make him squeal.

'A little *lean*, I think,' he announces, and the pointed tip of his tongue appears, like a small snake finding its way out of his face, desperate to taste the blood on the blade. 'Maybe we

should *fatten* you up, shall we?' He reverses his chair and, still inspecting the red-smeared knife, gives the order for the two men to be taken inside.

The Omega gives them more trouble than Hannibal, though a sharp blow to the back of Will's neck soon renders his limbs useless as pain saps his strength. Hannibal remains calm and polite for the duration, watching with an expression of mild, detached curiosity at the scene unfolding before him.

Mason leads the way into his personal pigpen; a white-tiled room off the barn that houses his favorite hogs.

There's a cage set up, specifically, for Dr Lecter.

The Alpha and Omega are wheeled in on trolleys, strapped across the chests, arms and legs, made to stand upright and watch, even as they are pushed towards their doom.

'It's more trouble to move a semi-wild pig against its will than it is to kidnap a man,' Mason informs them, giddy with excitement to know that his dream is *finally* coming true. His long, cold months plotting revenge, finally coming to fruition… And it's all going *exactly* to plan.

'Pigs are harder to get hold of,' Cordell adds, equally smug in his part of the charade. 'And big ones are stronger than an Alpha.'

'And there are the tusks to consider,' Mason muses, watching as Hannibal and Will are placed, none-too-gently, into position across the aisle from each other, each man locked in place with leather and steel. '*If* you want to maintain the integrity of your abdomen.' He leers at Will. 'Something worth maintaining, eh, Mr Graham?' He sniggers. 'I hear pelvic trauma is *deadly* for an unborn child.'

For the first time since Florence, Hannibal feels a flicker of pain. Not for himself, but for his beloved Will and the child they could have shared together. He watches carefully as Mason wheels himself closer to the Omega; watches Will gaze blearily down at the Beta from his bindings, the bandages soaked through with more blood from being dumped on the floor of the truck during moving.

'Tusked beasts instinctively disembowel,' Mason adds, greedy eyes staring at the white shirt under which Will's scar is hiding. Before he kills him, he wants to see it. To open it up again and press his hand inside the space where a baby once grew. 'At swine fairs,' he continues, using the joystick to turn his wheelchair around to face Hannibal, 'I've seen exotic pigs from all over the *world*.' He gazes up at the Alpha; broken, bloody, beaten. '*You* are the best of *all* that I've seen.'

Hannibal smiles, pleased with the compliment. He is the best, after all. A true Alpha, like the Primal predators of old.

'We are going to have some good, funny times, Dr Lecter,' Mason promises, his blue eyes glittering with cold cruelty as he imagines all the ways to hurt the man who broke his spine. 'You and your Omegan *slut* are *mine* to play with. And we have *all* the time in the world.'

He turns to the security guards awaiting their next instruction.

‘Hose them down and clean them up. Cordell and I are going back to the house. I think I’ll have a rest before dinner. When the bell rings at seven, dress them in the outfits laid out in the next room, and then bring them in through the back.’ Pausing, Mason cocks his head as he looks Will up and down and then says, with a wink at Hannibal, ‘Best make sure you clean this one *inside* and *out*, if you know what I mean. Omegas can be *so* dirty.’ He chuckles and leads the way out of the room. ‘Let the good times begin.’

***

As Cordell baths Mason in warm water, taking care to pat dry and moisturize his fragile, scarred skin, the Sardinian thugs – hired to replace Carlos and his incompetent brothers – hose Hannibal and Will down with icy water. They keep the Alpha strapped to the gurney, knowing better than to risk releasing the stronger man after going to such effort to capture him, but the Omega is easier to shove to the ground and shackle. They drag him, kicking and biting, and vent their frustration on him with fists and feet until the white tiles of the washroom drip red.

Hannibal calls to them the moment they pause for breath.

‘Care for him now and I will kill you quickly,’ he promises, smiling beatifically at them as they circle him, cracking their knuckles and baring crooked, yellowing teeth. They hiss profanities at him, telling him he will die here, and one goes so far as to spit in his face – Hannibal will take his time with that one, no matter what – but they linger near him, giving Will the space he so desperately needs.

‘Mason will want him in good condition,’ Hannibal adds, trying another tactic, concentrating on speaking without allowing his teeth to chatter in the cold air. ‘If he plans to torture him, I doubt he’d want your marks all over his property.’

The Sards mutter amongst themselves at that, and Hannibal’s eyes glitter at the scent of unease. He watches as they traipse back into the wash area to fetch the dripping, shivering Omega. They dump the naked man back onto the trolley and lash him back into place, slapping his face and checking his pulse before retreating to their station for cigarettes and coffee.

Alone with only the snuffling pigs to overhear, Hannibal shakes wet hair from his face and leans forwards.

‘Will, can you hear me?’

Will grunts a soft, pained sound of acknowledgement, trying to lift his aching head as if drawn by a magnet to Hannibal’s quiet, insistent voice. The Alpha purrs, just once, pitching it low so as not to carry beyond their space. It is both praise and encouragement, and Will whines in response, muscles contracting as he fights against the darkness pressing against the edges of his vision.

‘You were magnificent,’ Hannibal whispers, aching to touch his beloved once again. ‘When you came to me in Florence. When you tracked me. Hunted me down.’

‘I was stupid,’ Will mutters, a helpless tear rolling down his bruised, battered cheek because he’ll never see the twins again. He’ll never hold his son or his daughter again. Never read to them. Never watch them grow. ‘I was stupid… And now I’m going to die here, with you.’

‘Mason won’t kill us yet,’ Hannibal says, confident in his assertion. ‘He wishes to torture us, first.’

‘You must be so *proud* of your former patient,’ Will slurs, managing to lift his chin just enough to glare at the smiling Alpha. ‘He’s embraced his true nature.’

‘Mason has no worm with which to destroy himself,’ Hannibal agrees. ‘He has freed himself from the shackles of modern convention.’

‘He’s transformed,’ Will murmurs, caught in the eddy of his Alpha’s words, knowledge and understanding rising up within him as surely as his dark shadow fills his veins. ‘Elevated to a status beyond his peers.’

‘We changed him,’ Hannibal says, lifting one bare shoulder in a small shrug. ‘You and I. We molded him into the man he is today.’

‘He cut his own face off,’ Will argues, but Hannibal shakes his head.

‘He wielded the blade, but it was you who pulled the strings. *You*, Will, who set the snare and watched as the rabbit screamed.’

‘I let myself get too lost in you,’ Will says, staring miserably at the man he’d loved. The man who had destroyed him.

The man who, barely two days ago, had been trying to cut open his skull to eat his brain.

‘The brain itself feels no pain,’ Hannibal says, catching the thought like a leaf on the breeze down one of the many empty passageways between their shared Palace. ‘The anesthetic would have ensured you felt nothing as I tied and sealed the major blood vessels.’

‘I would have watched you firm slivers of my prefrontal lobe in lemon juice and ice water, tossed in flour and breadcrumbs, and sauteed in hot butter,’ Will growls. ‘You would have *fed me my own brain* and then sliced up the rest of it to consume with croutons and caper berries for supper.’

‘I would have held you with me, forever,’ Hannibal replies. ‘Like moonbeams…’

‘Carried home in a jar,’ Will breathes, understanding, with a rush, the level of twisted devotion driving the man to do such wicked things. ‘Hannibal, you *can’t* keep doing this to me.’

‘All I want for you, Will, is complete freedom and peace and self-sufficiency,’ Hannibal says, leaning forwards against the leather straps until his skin turns white from the pressure.

‘You’ve never lacked the courage to say what you think, but you’ve been hampered by constraints. Pity, *mylimasis*, has no place at the table.’

‘And *you* keep thinking that you can make a place for *Mischa* in this world. A prime place. Vacated for her. Whether that’s me or Abigail or…’ Will bit his lower lip to keep from saying *“our daughter”*, and Hannibal, thankfully, reads the abrupt stop as a surge of emotion.

Before the Alpha can reply, however, the Sards return from their break. They bring a medical kit with them and re-stitch Will’s forehead, taking care to clean and dry his face.

‘You talk again,’ the burliest thug says, waving a knife in front of Hannibal’s face, ‘and I’ll cut out his tongue.’ He points to Will, who scowls from under fresh bandages, and motions for his men to tightens the chains securing them to links bolted to the concrete floor. The resulting tension pulls their trolleys further apart, making unheard conversation impossible, and exposes Will to the eyeline of the Sard’s break area. One of them whistles his appreciation at the Omega’s naked body and exposed genitals, and the leader with the knife smirks at Hannibal even as he runs his hand through Will’s pubic hair, gathering up his scent before sauntering away.

Will, teeth clenched so hard his jaw hurts, shuts his eyes tight against the sight of Hannibal’s anger and tries not to smell stale sweat, whiskey, and oil on concrete.

It’s not Coby. It’s not Samuel. And that’s the worst they can do to me.

Mason will do the rest.

***

Waking refreshed after his nap, Mason is eager to attend to business ahead of dinner. He checks on his prisoners, using the monitors set up beside his bed to watch the two bound forms of Hannibal and Will, naked and shivering, before reading the e-mail update from Inspector Benetti.

Then, once his pulse has calmed, he summons Dr Bloom to his suite.

‘Sad news about Jack Crawford,’ he says, feigning an air of regret not bought for one moment by the Alpha in the Chanel suit. ‘Appears Hannibal Lecter killed him in Florence. I hope there’s some satisfaction in being the final victim of the Chesapeake Ripper.’ His voice thickens before he manages to swallow, and adds, slyly, ‘There’ll certainly be some notoriety.’

‘The feces are flying again in Florence,’ Margot announces, striding into the room wearing a gold, silk-lined lamé blouse with a high back to hide her new crest. She makes a point of keeping her gaze on her brother, refusing to betray the new bond she has with Alana. ‘Jack Crawford is alive.’

Mason narrows his eyes at the two women. There’s something different between them, and they’ve definitely been thick as thieves since deciding to fuck, but surely Margot wouldn’t be stupid enough to risk asking Dr Bloom to Court her?

It would be suicide for the Alpha, of course.

‘Well, that’s disappointing,’ he says, feeling as if a Christmas present has just been snatched away. Like a promising child turning out to be a teenager.

‘He saw the snatch,’ Margot warns, and Mason’s chest tightens in alarm.

‘I trust you haven’t betrayed doctor-patient confidentiality, Dr Bloom,’ he growls, settling his steely gaze on his therapist.

‘Your trust hasn’t been misplaced,’ Alana assures him, and Margot is quick – too quick – to jump in and distract him by adding,

‘The FBI *is* going catch the first squeal on the kidnapping.’

Mason scoffs away her pathetic, *Omegan* concerns.

‘The moment Jack Crawford set foot in Italy, I registered complaints with the local authorities, the sheriff, the US Attorney’s office, that he’d been *harassing* me. Calling me, late at night, with incoherent threats.’

Alana considers this, nodding shrewdly.

‘Of course,’ she muses, ‘he can’t prove he didn’t.’

‘And it muddies the water,’ Mason agrees, still looking sideways at her with open suspicion.

‘Now you can head off a warrant,’ Margot begins, but Mason rolls his eyes.

‘There will be no warrant,’ he says. ‘And there will be no warrant forthcoming.’

Margot swallows, deferring to her brother’s superiority, and glances up from under her lashes when Alana speaks.

‘I appreciate wanting to kill Hannibal Lecter. And I’m not without benefit from that.’ She smiles up at her mate, a low, rumbling purr rising from deep within her Alphan throat, designed to soothe the other woman.

Mason narrows his eyes again, feeling the irritating tug of control slipping in her direction.

‘He can’t make good on his promise to murder you if he’s *dead*, now, can he?’ reminding her of her tenuous, *dependent* situation.

‘But he’s not dead,’ Alana reminds him, and her blue eyes darken to red. ‘Play with your food, Mason, and you give it the opportunity to bite back.’

‘Oh, I’m not *playing*, Dr Bloom,’ Mason insists, irritated that she would even suggest such a thing. He’s never been as serious as he is about eating Dr Lecter.

‘Hannibal is,’ Alana says, red-painted lips curving into a coolly amused smile, crimson eyes twinkling. ‘He’s always playing.’

And he always wins.

***

The Sardinian guards dress them when it’s time for dinner. They are as careful to buff Hannibal and Will’s dress shoes as Cordell is to shine Mason’s, and the tailored shirt collars are folded and pinned to perfection.

When they are wheeled into the Verger formal dining room, Hannibal wears an amused smile, as if pleased with the whole turn of events. Mason watches, eyes narrowed, as the Alpha *somehow* manages to make the guards appear to be attending him, rather than forcing him.

Once the contraption contracts, forcing Hannibal’s knees to bend so he’s sitting, the Sards release his right hand. Hannibal rolls the wrist, testing for injury and relishing the freedom, and wiggles his fingers. A hand free is all he needs, but he’ll wait to see what happens next.

Mason may be predictable, but his beloved Will is a delightful mystery.

‘I snatched Will Graham right out of your mouth,’ Mason announces, more pleased with himself than he has a right to be. ‘You must be *famished*.’

As he speaks, Cordell brings in a plate of food; half-oysters served with a chili-tomato relish, which the chubby Beta places before Dr Lecter.

‘There is an inescapable parallel between you and Jezebel, Mason,’ Hannibal says, eyeing the plate with open interest. ‘Keen Bible student that you are, you’ll recall dogs ate Jezebel’s face… along with the rest of her.’

Mason scoffs at the analogy.

‘Well, if Jezebel had been right with the Risen Jesus, the Riz would have provided her with a *new* face,’ he replies, smirking cruelly as the Omega, forced to sit between Hannibal and Mason. ‘As he has provided *mine*.’

He waits, watching with satisfaction as Will Graham’s cheeks pale, the Omega’s eyes flashing gold with fear with dawning realization.

‘The transplant surgery is extremely skillful,’ Mason continues, acknowledging the other Beta entering with a silver platter on which rests a suckling pig roast. ‘Which is why Cordell here will be performing the face-off.’

Hannibal listens to the interaction with mild interest, watching the myriad of emotions play across Will’s face. Fear, revulsion… disdain.

‘Hello.’ Cordell smiles, unkindly, at Will, his blue eyes flat and cold, before he turns on his heel and leaves the room again, off to fetch another dish from the adjoining kitchen.

‘You boys remind me of that German cannibal Alpha who advertised for a mate,’ Mason says, returning his attention to the pair of captured men before him. ‘And then *ate* him, and his *penis*, before he died.’ Cordell sets a tureen of sausages before Hannibal, who grins at the analogy, thoroughly enjoying the banter. ‘Tragedy being,’ Mason adds, ‘the penis was *overcooked!’*

Hannibal considers eating one of the sausages, but his restraints allow for little movement beyond lifting his fork to scoop oysters from the plate, and the meat doesn’t smell good enough to expend the effort.

‘Go to all that trouble to eat a mate,’ Mason continues, as if telling a great joke, ‘and you overcook his penis!’ He tilts his head, the closest thing he can manage to a shrug with his broken neck. ‘They ate it, anyway. They had to, they *committed*. But they didn’t enjoy it.’

He directs his words, now, to Dr Lecter, who raises an eyebrow in polite interest.

‘I’m committed to enjoying every *bite* of *you*,’ Mason promises, and Hannibal smiles, pleased to know that such effort is being made over him.

He deserves only the best, after all.

‘You… you’re going to… *eat* him… with my *face?’* Will wonders if he’s going to be sick, and he swallows the extra spit wetting his mouth as he glances, sideways, at Mason.

‘Yes,’ the Beta hisses. ‘I got a *taste* for it after you two had me eat my *nose*.’

‘You must be terribly proud that you could pull this off,’ Hannibal says, drawing Mason’s attention back to himself to give Will some time to process this revelation. ‘It’s dangerous to get exactly what you want,’ he warns, glancing up from under his brows as he uses the side of his fork to cut oyster flesh free of the shell. ‘What will you do after you’ve eaten me?’

‘You could *wreck* some foster homes and torment some children,’ Will growls, eyes burning bright gold as he remembers the torture Mason inflicted when he was whole.

‘*Oh*,’ Mason purrs, pouting at him with his broken mouth. ‘Or drink *martinis* made with tears?’

‘But where, Mason, would the hardcore fun come from?’ Hannibal prompts, met with a tutting sound from the scarred Beta.

‘It’s foolish to dilute such an ecstatic time as this with fears about the future,’ Mason says. He glances at his assistant, who warms lemon-scented towels on the side dresser. ‘Er, Cordell? Mr Graham’s looking very dry. A little moisturizer, please.’

‘I’m curious,’ Hannibal asks, keeping an eye on the broad, heavy Beta as he moves to fetch the lotion from another side unit. ‘What will be the first cuts of me you’ll serve?’

‘The first course, of course,’ Cordell says, pausing to smirk down at him, ‘will be your hands and feet.’ He despises the way the Alpha smiles pleasantly at him, not in the least bit concerned for his fate, even when he adds, viciously, ‘Sizzling on a Promethean barbeque.’

Will glances round, wondering how Hannibal truly feels, despite the calm, collected appearance of curiosity. His own belly swarms with nerves and he wants nothing more than for the FBI to burst down the doors and save them both from this nightmare.

Please, he thinks, watching the muscled Beta threaten his Alpha. *Please, make it stop. Please, just make it stop.*

'The coal is white and very hard,' Cordell adds, his white uniform doing nothing to hide his erection at the prospect of slowly killing the Alpha. 'It makes a clear ringing sound when struck.'

Hannibal nods thoughtfully and turns to Mason, adding, slyly,

'You've thought of everything.'

Mason preens under the praise, his blue eyes dancing with excitement.

'And, after that, we'll have a little pajama party, you and I,' he says. 'You can be in shorties by then. Cordell is going to keep you alive for a *very* long time.'

Cordell moves around to the other side of Will, opening a small jar of expensive moisturizer as he does so. He leans down, examining the quiet, subdued Omega, and scoops out a dollop.

Before he can apply the cream, however, Will attacks. The Omega lunges up and sideways, clamping his teeth into the flesh of the Beta's fat cheek. He sets his jaw and grinds his teeth, slicing through muscle in a clean, round disc.

The best morsels of many creatures, after all, are the cheeks.

Cordell screams in pain and recoils, blood spurting through his fingers where he tries to press the wound closed.

Will spits the cheek out onto his empty plate, smearing the gold-rimmed porcelain with blood and saliva, a snarl lingering in the air between them.

Do not moisturize my fucking face.

Mason raises his eyebrows at Cordell, who clutches the table in a white-fisted grip, quickly losing the feeling in his extremities as shock sets in, and then frowns at the troublesome Omega.

'Well,' he says, imagining himself tapping his fingers against the armrest. 'No pajama party for *you*, Mr Graham. We're gonna feed *you* to the pigs, as soon as Cordell has removed your *face*. In a much more *civilized* fashion that you just tried to remove *his*.'

Ignoring him, Will looks over at Hannibal, instinctively moving towards the rich purr rising from the Alpha's throat. Hannibal's eyes glow red and a proud smile curves his lips up, brightening his expression.

He will remember this moment forever. Will, his teeth bared and bloody, chin stained red and jaw working to grind the last bits of gristle between his molars.

Beautiful.

***

Cordell leaves the remainder of the dinner service to the Sardinian guards. Mason eats little, choosing to save his appetite for his captive Alpha's hands and feet, and Hannibal is returned to the pig chamber without dessert.

As the Beta stitches the bruised, misshapen flap of skin back onto his face, the Sards strip Hannibal naked, dose him with another round of Neutralizer, and then suspend him in chains from the ceiling, his arms and legs spread wide.

Cordell takes the honor of branding him. He heats the iron until it glows red, the raised outlines of the Verger name, hog, and crown bright yellow.

The temperature has been dropping rapidly since sunset, and the air shivers around the burning iron. Cordell is wrapped in a thick coat and gloves, and still feels a chill seeping through from the concrete floor. Hannibal, wearing nothing to protect against the cold, refuses to allow his body to shiver.

Retreating once more inside his Memory Palace, he takes refuge in his room dedicated to Florence, and to Will. When the branding iron touches his back, melting flesh before cauterizing the wounds, Hannibal turns his attention inwards. He retreats to the cool shade of his Memory Palace, moving swiftly through the rooms until he locates a new one; the Uffizi Gallery, resplendent with *La Primavera*, with Will in the place of the teasing demon.

It is his homage to his beloved, and their time together in Florence, and he lies on the cool marble of the floor, gazing up at the frescoed ceiling, where Will once more replaces the angels; wrathful and victorious.

Cordell takes care to press the brand just right; too hard and he risks smudging the imprint of the brand. Too light and the writing won't be legible. He feels a stab of disappointment, quickly hardening to resolve, when the Alpha merely takes a slow, deliberate breath, silently processing the pain.

He won't be silent forever.

'Mason would've preferred to brand your face,' he says, returning the iron to the white-hot coals of the brazier. 'He fought bravely, and with his own funds, against the Humane Slaughter Act, and managed to keep face branding legal.'

'It's very important to Mason that I have the pigs' experience,' Hannibal says, his rich, smoky voice at odds with his vulnerable position. He gives no indication of concern for his exposed genitals or helpless position, and it bothers Cordell more than he'd like. To distract himself, the Beta wanders away to look down at some of the Verger swine bred here on the Farm.

‘Mason has done *beautiful* things with these creatures,’ he says, considering the sow before him, able to suckle twice as many piglets as her counterparts. He thinks of the pig upstairs, and the special litter held inside, and chuckles. ‘*Very* special.’ He turns back to the Alpha and smirks. ‘Truly visionary.’

Hannibal considers him, something missing behind his eyes, leaving them dark and cold.

‘He has a wealth of information and resources in his faceless skull,’ he replies, reminding Cordell of how broken Mason is.

How broken *Hannibal* made him.

‘The longer you’re respectful,’ Cordell warns, sidling closer with a nasty smile, ‘the longer you’ll keep your tongue.’

‘And when I *do* lose my tongue?’ Hannibal asks, quirking an eyebrow in question.

Cordell smiles.

‘I’ll boil it and slice it, very thin, marinate it in olive oil, garlic, parsley and vinegar.’

‘Simple and clean,’ Hannibal says, nodding his approval of the dish. ‘And delicious.’

‘Have they told you the drill?’ Cordell asks, seriously wondering how the Alpha can possibly be this calm in the face of such imminent pain and dismemberment. ‘The drill *is*,’ he says, ‘in a few hours, I’ll come down here and remove all you’ve got below the elbows and knees. I’ll keep you going with IVs and tourniquets until the very last.’ He smirks down at the Alpha’s cock. ‘Some things are best saved for last.’ Looking up, he tries to ignore the flare of irritation at Lecter’s continued, genial smile. ‘Once you’re dead,’ he continues, ‘I’ll prepare your loins and ribs. *Aged*.’

‘Meats are aged,’ Hannibal agrees, ‘not only for tenderness but also for flavor.’

‘And flavors change,’ Cordell says. ‘Every day, I’ll feed Mason some new part of you.’ His eyes glitter with jealous hatred and sadistic joy. ‘Don’t you worry, Dr Lecter. You will *always* be cooked to *perfection*.’

He can’t wait to kill and cook the other man. Fucking Alphas always think they’re so much better than Betas.

He’ll show them. He’ll show them all.

Just as soon as he’s punished the rabid Omega, Will Graham.

***

‘I think I might feed the eel some delicacy of Lecter,’ Mason muses, watching the vicious moray glide through the waters of its tank as Margot assists him into his wheelchair. He’s wearing red pajamas, silk-lined to protect his delicate, scarred skin; perfect for a gentle recovery after his face transplant surgery. He’s been watching with satisfaction as Hannibal is

stripped, branded and then secured in an uncomfortable, disabling position in the freezing barn. ‘His *genitals*, perhaps.’

Margot studiously ignores him, pushing the support bars into place with more force than necessary.

Mason narrows his eyes down at his sister. She seems… different, somehow. More confident. Or, at least, less vulnerable.

That fucking bitch.

‘How long have you and Dr Bloom been mated?’ he asks, and Margot’s sudden tensing confirms his suspicions.

His sweet, delicate baby sister. Bonded to a *female* Alpha?

Papa would be so disappointed.

‘Not long,’ Margot lies, sitting back on her heels to reach for the front support bar of the chair.

‘Longer than *that*, Cordell says,’ Mason replies, his lipless mouth curving into a sly grin. At least, that’s what he’s aiming for.

Once he has his new face, expressions will be much easier again.

‘Does Dr Bloom want children?’ he asks, casually reminding Margot of the likely reason she sought out the other woman in the first place. Does Dr Bloom know she’s being played? How delicious if she doesn’t?

Mason wonders if she’ll Cut Margot’s crest herself, or if he’ll be able to do it. Alphas don’t take betrayal lightly, and there’s no way Margot’s been honest with her new beau.

‘I’m sure you’ve had a chance to check under the hood by now,’ Mason adds, smirking at his sister. ‘How’s the uterus? Intact?’ He quirks his eyebrows, blue eyes gleaming. ‘Are the hips *childbearing?* Roomy?’

Did she make you scream as much as you did when I took your virginity?

‘Land the plane, Mason,’ Margot snaps, irritated by her brother’s incessant rambling. The Beta isn’t as scary as he used to be. Her Alpha will protect her, now, and soon there’ll be no Mason to hold her back.

‘Oh, you’ve got a *big* surprise coming to you, Margot,’ Mason promises, and then wets his lipless mouth with his slimy, pointed tongue, making a smacking sound as he does. ‘Would it spoil anything for you if I told you I’d already found us a surrogate?’ At Margot’s concerned frown and flash of golden eyes, he knows she’s hooked. She can’t help but be curious. Omegas are self-destructive by design. ‘Not for my sperm,’ he adds, ‘but for *your* eggs.’

‘I don’t *have* any,’ Margot sighs, rolling her eyes as she turns away. She’s bored of this routine. Bored of the constant pain it brings to know she’ll never be whole again. ‘You *took* them.’

‘I most certainly did,’ Mason says, his voice rising as Margot turns her back on him. ‘But I didn’t humpty-dumpty them! I just went and found them a new basket.’

Margot stops in her tracks, bile scratching the back of her throat.

Mason put her eggs in another woman?

She turns slowly, her heart pounding and sweat making the gold silk blouse stick to her back. Her brother smirks, as best he can with his broken face, and she knows he’s telling her the truth.

He’s always extra gleeful when he hurts her with the truth.

‘I told you I wanted to give you a Verger baby,’ Mason says, ‘our own baby. Yours and mine.’ He forces a grin, tilting his head in thought. ‘Well… mostly yours.’

Mason is holding my baby hostage… Because he knows Alana and I are planning to leave.

Margot’s blood runs cold and panic chokes her. She needs her baby. She needs to protect her offspring.

She needs to find a way to kill Mason, once and for all.

Approaching slowly, holding the padded waist bar like a weapon between both hands, she advances on her brother. Mason watches carefully, certain he’s still in control of the situation. Margot won’t risk hurting him, not yet; she doesn’t know where her child is, yet. If anything happens to him, the baby will surely die, and she won’t risk that.

‘Where’s the surrogate, Mason?’ Margot whispers, golden eyes locked onto the Beta’s cruel blue ones. Mason considers the question, glancing off to the side, and says, deliberately,

‘She’s resting at the moment.’

Hope flares, quickly replaced by fresh fear, and a tear slides down Margot’s cheek.

‘She’s here?’

My baby is here? I could see it? Hold it? Nurse and protect it?

To have her dream so close makes the torture all the crueler.

‘She’s on the farm,’ Mason confirms, inclining his head in a nod. He watches as Margot’s fingers twitch into fists of impotent rage and smells the hot sugar of Omegan fury.

‘I wanna see her,’ Margot demands, and Mason snaps the trap shut around her.

Poor, stupid Margot. She never learns. Her emotions are her greatest weakness.

And Omegas are so very emotional.

‘First, I think you need to prepare yourself,’ he croons, feigning an air of brotherly concern. ‘Psychologically, I mean. This is going to be a very emotional experience for you, Margot. I have to think about appropriate timing.’

Margot glares down at him, held still with useless, shaking rage, and then slams the support bar down into its fixtures, uncaring that she crushes Mason’s wasted arm underneath.

‘Don’t think too long, smiley,’ she warns, and Mason laughs, pulling his hand free to clap her in applaud.

‘Oh, that’s the *spirit*, Margot!’ he praises. ‘Your maternal instinct’s revving up.’ He smirks at her breasts, the cleavage scant inches from his face, and then winks at her blush. ‘I love it.’

Margot’s face twitches, her upper lip pulling back from small fangs as anger battles with fear. She can’t act yet. Not yet.

But soon.

Mason’s time has officially run out.

***

Will is left alone in the dining room, for what feels like hours after Mason leaves to prepare for surgery and Hannibal is returned to the pig barn for the next round of torture.

Cordell has taken his flap of cheek with him to reattach it to his face and Will sits where he is chained, his bladder increasingly full and uncomfortable, dried blood itching along his nose and chin.

He’d thought he would die in Florence. At Hannibal’s hand, consumed by his former Alpha.

This is so much worse.

Mason’s lackey is going to remove his face, attach it to Mason and then use it to consume Hannibal…

I never wanted to eat him. Not him. Not my Alpha.

He misses the twins. Misses his dogs. He wishes he could slip into the river and be with them but whenever he ventures inside his mind, he finds himself wandering the cool stone corridors of Hannibal’s Memory Palace.

He’d once said that he couldn’t get Hannibal out of his head. Now, it seems, he can’t get out of the Alpha’s.

His stomach rumbles with hunger. When did he last eat? Before reuniting with Hannibal at the Uffizi Gallery… Before meeting with Jack?

Had his last meal really been a prepackaged sandwich from a cheap bistro when he'd finally arrived in Florence?

I'm sorry, Gracie. I'm sorry, Daniel. I wish I could have been a better father to you. I wish I'd stayed at home with you and Pops, to take care of you. But I didn't. I hunted down the man who Cut me, who gutted me and left me for dead and now I'm going to lose everything.

He doesn't know how much time passes, but eventually he becomes aware that he's no longer alone.

Alana Bloom, walking now, albeit with a cane, enters the dining hall with a sad, disappointed expression on her face. Her eyes flare the same red as her lipstick at the sight of his wounds and Will smells the sharp, burning scent of her Alphan anger.

Did Mason capture her, too? Or is it what he fears? Is she as coldly furious as her expression suggests?

He has to know. He has to ask.

'What are *you* doing here?' he whispers, shaking his head at his former friend.

Alana considers Will from a safe distance, her hand tightening on the silver hand of her walking stick before she forces it to relax.

Will brought this on himself. He should have stayed well enough alone. After what Hannibal did to him… did to his *baby?* He deserves whatever he gets.

She can almost make herself believe the lie.

Still, there's no use lying to Will. He'll only see through the façade if she does. And she wants him to know that she's not okay. That *nothing* can ever be okay after what Hannibal did.

'I'm Mason Verger's psychiatrist,' she says, receiving the disapproving hum and frown from Will that she'd expected.

'Is that part of *his* therapy,' the Omega asks, 'or *yours?'*

'I think we're all working through some issues,' Alana replies, eyes flickering crimson as if to remind the Omega of the biological changes undergone since the attack. 'I'm putting an emphasis on self-preservation.'

As she speaks, Alana lowers herself into a chair. Her back may be mostly healed but standing for long periods still hurts and she wants to be in best shape for protecting Margot.

'Jack's alive,' she adds softly, knowing Will would want to know that about his friend and mentor.

‘Good for Jack,’ Will mutters, his own hands tightening within the leather cuffs of his restraints. He works his jaw, choosing his next words carefully, and, when he looks up at Alana, he doesn’t keep any of the hurt and anger of her betrayal from his voice. ‘You helped Mason Verger find us.’

You helped him hurt us.

‘I helped Mason find *Hannibal*,’ Alana replies, tilting her head at Will in cool consideration. She’d thought their Bond was broken; severed with the Cutting of his crest.

Why was Will still so devoted to the Alpha who had ruined his life?

‘We followed Bâtard-Montrachet when we should’ve just followed *you*.’

‘Almost as ugly as what Mason wants to *do* to us,’ Will muses, ignoring the Alpha’s implied suggestion of obsession with his former mate, ‘is the fact that he *can* do it with the tacit agreement of people sworn to uphold the law. *Alphas*,’ he adds, sharply, ‘who are supposed to be *biologically* wired to protect Omegas.’

‘I was trying to get to Hannibal before you,’ Alana replies, wishing she sounded angry instead of sad. Wishing she didn’t feel such pity for the broken, abused and, ultimately, condemned Omega. ‘I knew you couldn’t stop yourself, so I had to try.’

‘By facilitating torture and death?’ Will scoffs, glaring at her from under a bloodstained bandage, his face purple and swollen around the eye and on the cheek; courtesy of Mason’s thugs.

‘I can abide the thought of Hannibal tortured,’ Alana says coldly, meeting his gaze. ‘Not necessarily to death.’ She swallows. ‘I’d say he has it coming… wouldn’t you?’

Please, Will… Don’t be too far gone. I don’t want to lose you to his darkness. He killed your baby, Will. He killed Abigail. He broke your mind open and toyed with you for months.

At the Omega’s pained, torn expression, the tears glittering in bloodshot, gold eyes, she sighs.

It’s too late for Will. He’s been swallowed whole by the beast and he doesn’t even feel himself being devoured.

‘Or maybe you wouldn’t,’ she whispers, realizing she truly has lost her friend.

Will frowns, shaking his head slightly to clear his blurry vision.

‘What did you think would happen?’ he asks, genuinely curious as to the scene imagined in the naïve Alpha’s mind.

Alana confirms his worst suspicion.

‘I thought Jack Crawford and the FBI would come to the rescue.’ The Alpha sighs. ‘But the finer details of what I thought would happen have evolved.’

Will senses her regret like a shark tasting blood. He raises his head and lowers his defenses as he does, releasing a dam of fear and pain in a tidal wave of scent designed to trigger in her the fabled Alpha protective urges.

‘Then *you* have to evolve, Alana,’ he begs, doing nothing to keep his voice from shaking. This is his only hope; his last chance to get help for him and for Hannibal.

He whines, soft and low, and watches with desperate hope as Alana’s pulse quickens and her cheeks flush.

No matter what’s happened between them, no matter their differences, Will is still an Omega, and she is an Alpha.

And he is asking her for her help.

Seeing the resolve harden on Alana’s face, Will dares a small, hungry smile. Hannibal may allow harm to come to himself, but he won’t tolerate Will being hurt by any hand but his own.

They can use that to their advantage.

‘You have to spill blood,’ he says, laying the options before Alana like cards on a table. ‘Either by your hand or… someone else’s.’

A life for a life. Find a way to free Hannibal and he will save me. He’ll save us all.

***

Margot waits just long enough to be sure Mason is in the makeshift operating theatre before heading to the pig barn. She wraps up in a fur coat to protect against the chill, pitying Dr Lecter in his freezing stall.

The pigs all have heat lamps above them, but the Alpha is kept in the bitter cold. He is on his knees on soiled straw, arms lashed up behind him, but head forced to bow by the leather collar attached to the gate. It is a deliberately excruciating position, one that hampers his breathing and allows for no rest.

An exhausted Alpha is weak, after all, and easily beaten by Betas.

Margot purrs, just once, to soothe the Sardinian guard who looks up at the sound of her heels on the tiled floor.

‘*Bonasera, signor*,’ she says, lowering her golden eyes demurely to lure him into a false sense of security.

The ploy works; the guard inclines his head and allows her to enter the room with a mutual greeting.

‘Bonasera, signora Verger.’

As two gold-tipped shoes come to a stop before the bars of his stall gate, Hannibal forces a complimentary purr up from his choked, uncomfortable throat.

‘Thank you for coming, Margot,’ he says, greeting her pleasantly, as if they are meeting for coffee, not over his burned, beaten body. ‘It doesn’t seem that long since I treated you,’ the Alpha continues. ‘Have you started taking the chocolate, as Mason likes to say...?’ He sighs. ‘After you fought him for so long?’

‘Are we in therapy, now?’ Margot asks, tears swimming in her eyes at the sight of the Verger mark Dr Lecter’s back.

She remembers the feeling of that branding iron on her own skin, all too well.

Hannibal sighs again, though Margot isn’t sure the sound is just him struggling for breath.

‘You tell me,’ the Alpha says, and the soft, conspiratorial tone reminds Alana of the red and gray office in Baltimore. The comfortable leather chairs and the sense of peace, safety and understanding she felt when in the Alpha’s presence.

Even when he encouraged me to kill my brother, he did it without making me feel like a monster.

She’s always felt like Dr Lecter understands her. Sees and accepts her for who she really is.

She doesn’t want him to die like this. And she needs his help to stop Mason.

Getting onto her knees, Margot lowers herself to the same level as the captive Alpha. She leans closer, confiding in him, and, for a moment, it’s just like old times.

‘Mason promised to give something back to me,’ she confesses, seeking his advice and guidance like a sinner before a priest. ‘Something that he stole.’ At Hannibal’s questioning look up from under bloodstained bangs and a pain-furrowed brow, Margot explains, miserably, ‘There was a surrogate all along. It’s a Verger baby… It’s *my* baby.’

Hannibal thinks about this. Thinks about how to phrase it to get Margot where he wants her.

The truth will work in his favor, and he wields it with deadly accuracy.

‘Mason will deny you,’ he says, simply and without emotion. ‘He will always deny you.’ He sighs again. ‘You know you will have to kill him.’

Margot’s eyes shimmer with tears. She knew the reality, but having Dr Lecter say it, so bluntly, makes it harder to hear.

She’ll never get what she truly wants from Mason. He enjoys torturing her too much for that. He won’t risk losing her favorite toy.

‘Are you saying you’d do it for me?’ she asks, voice wobbling as she half-heartedly jokes about the only possible conclusion to their situation. Her mouth draws down and tears fall. ‘I could never trust you.’

Hannibal tries to shift, his shoulders on fire from the immense pressure across his back.

‘No, of course not,’ he agrees. Then, ‘But you could trust me never to deny that I did it.’ He swallows, pushing through the discomfort. ‘It would actually be more therapeutic for you to kill him yourself. You’ll remember I recommended that in session.’

It’s Margot’s turn to sigh, releasing more tears down her blotchy cheeks.

‘Wait until I could get away with it, you said,’ she recalls miserably.

Hannibal goes to shrug and winces at the flare of agony down his spine.

‘What difference would one more murder charge make to me?’ he reasons, glancing up at her again, his eyes swirling crimson and black. ‘I’m the only other suspect you’ve got. You can do it when it suits you, and I’ll write a letter, gloating about how much I enjoyed killing him myself.’

The solution seems so simple. So logical… It’s the only possible option she has, Margot thinks.

Another pair of heels clack on the marble tiles. The Sardinian guard looks up, more alert at the sight of Dr Bloom, the female Alpha, wearing a smart black and white coat, leather gloves and leaning heavily on her cane.

‘Bonasera,’ Alana murmurs, watching her Omega kneeling before Hannibal, deep in conversation about her current predicament.

Before the Sardinian can do more than flinch, Alana uses her superior speed to snatch up the tranquilizer gun from the side table and shoots a dart into the guard’s leg.

The dart plunges sedative into his system and the Sard slumps, unconscious before he hits the floor.

‘He has a pocketknife,’ Hannibal says, watching her carefully from his stall. Alana’s righteousness smells like woodfire and honey; she believes that what she’s doing is the right thing to protect the Omegas she cares about.

No matter who she has to hurt to do it.

Keeping her eyes on Margot and the restrained Alpha behind her, Alana reaches down and retrieves the small blade from the guard’s pocket. As she draws closer, Margot gets back to her feet, tucking herself closer to her Alpha’s side.

Hannibal looks up for as long as his strained muscles will allow, and then concedes to bowing his head before her in forced submission. It may endear Alana to his cause, after all, and he’s nothing if not pragmatic.

Alana stares down at Hannibal, rage and terror battling for dominance as she thinks of all the things he’s done. He’s a serial killer. A cannibal. He fucked her to distract her. To use her as

an alibi, even as he drove Will insane with Heat hormones. He had his mate *institutionalized*, killed Beverly Katz and Abel Gideon, and dismembered Miriam Lass.

He Cut Will as a punishment for Will's betrayal and murdered his own *baby*.

Propping her walking cane against the gate, Alana crouches before Hannibal. She wants to look him in the eye when she frees him.

She wants him to know that this is *her* choice. *Her* decision. Not his.

'I was trying to save Will from you,' she explains, her eyes glowing red. 'But, right now, you're the only one who can save *him*.'

I don't have your stomach for violence.

Hannibal waits, considering the request, and Alana realizes, helplessly, that he's going to make her ask.

Make her beg.

'Promise me you'll save him,' she whispers, staring deep into his eyes and feeling, absurdly, like she was making a deal with the Devil. When he waits another moment, the tension stretching out in a thin, crackling line of potential between them, she admits her final defeat. '*Please*.'

'I promise,' Hannibal says, and Alana sees, within his dark, soulless eyes, that his mind is no more bound by fear or kindness than Milton's were by physics.

I have the chance to cage the Devil, and yet here I am, releasing him back into the world.

For Will.

'And I *always* keep my promises, Alana,' Hannibal adds, his voice a dark purr filled with the promise of violence.

Be blind, Alana. Don't be brave.

'Just cut the ropes on one arm,' Hannibal continues, 'give me the knife and leave. I can do the rest.'

Alana rises, leaning heavily on the cane, and, before Margot can object, unlocks the gate. Crouching close to him again, she glares into his irritatingly placid face and says, very deliberately,

'Are you going to kill Mason?'

If he isn't, the deal is off.

'Margot is,' Hannibal says, lightly and simply. 'Snatch some of my hair,' he continues, 'back from the hairline, if you don't mind. Get some skin.' He swallows, holding his head up to

meet Alana's steady gaze, no matter the pain in his neck. 'Put it in Mason's hand after he's dead.'

Alana narrows her eyes, wondering at the man before her. The Alpha who could be so cruel and manipulative, and yet, right now, is offering to sacrifice himself for her and the happiness of her Omega.

'Could I have *ever* understood you?' she asks, and Hannibal thinks of their time together. Of Alana's narrow-minded ideals and stifling values.

He thinks of Will, and all his wicked darkness. Of the way he delights in doing bad things to bad people, and yet judges himself with all the mercy of the dungeon scales at Threave.

'No.'

Considering him for another, long moment, Alana makes a choice.

She has to get Margot out of here, and she has to save Will.

She leans forwards and rips out a chunk of Hannibal's hair, bringing with it a scrap of bloody skin. Taking satisfaction in the flash of pain across Hannibal's face, she straightens up and pockets the evidence.

Time to end this game.

Sawing through the rope securing Hannibal's left arm back, she places the knife on the sawdust in front of him and steps back as Hannibal quickly sets to work releasing himself. The Alpha's scent changes, thickening with Rut despite the Neutralizer flooding his system, and Alana's skin prickles at the sense of danger radiating from him.

Hannibal uses his teeth to pull the cut rope from his wrist and then uses the knife to begin cutting through the ties holding his head down. A slash and his second arm is free. He gets to his feet, muscles grinding and bones cracking as things settle back into place, and unbuckles the thick, ugly collar around his neck.

It's an old Omegan brace, still carrying with it the lingering scent of Margot's childhood pain. Hannibal rolls his shoulders, a hungry smile settling on his lips as strength floods him with heat.

It's his turn, now.

***

Cordell collects Will from the dining room, pushing him, none-too-gently, into a makeshift operating theater in a barn not far from the house.

'Omegas always think they're so *special*,' he says, shoving Will's head forwards to expose the scarred, vulnerable skin at the base of his neck. 'With their fancy *slick* and their *Crests*.' He chuckles. 'Well, you don't have a Crest anymore, do you?'

Will's stomach twists at the cruel reminder and he bares his teeth, thrashing in his bonds. He doesn't want Cordell anywhere near his nape but there's nothing he can do about it.

With a sickening swoop, he realizes the Beta is attaching a clamp to his nape, squeezing the still-tender flesh in a vice far tighter than anything Hannibal ever used.

'N-!'

His voice fails as the nerves are pinched and, just like that, he loses all control over his limbs. He can still feel everything – every jostle and scratch as Cordell removes his suit jacket, tie and shirt – but he can't do anything about it.

Think of the river. Wade into the stream.

He's desperate for an escape but his mind can't retreat. He can't stop *feeling* the painful pressure on his neck. The cold air against his exposed flesh and the sticky electrodes placed onto his chest.

Cordell lies him flat on his back, the gurney acting as an operating chair, and he straps Will's head in place with a tight bandage pressing down on his forehead stitches.

The heart monitor blips rapidly, testament to Will's anxious state, and, for a while after Cordell leaves, it's the only sound in the chilled room.

Approaching footsteps warn him of the Beta's return, but Will can't even look over towards him. He can blink, thankfully, but he can't do anything except stare up at the clear plastic draped over the steel frame creating the surgical space.

I'm going to die here, he thinks, wondering if he's resigned himself to that fact or is still in shock. *I'm going to die and I'll never see my family again.*

He's glad his Pops will take good care of the twins. There's some comfort in that.

Cordell steps up beside Will's prone body and sighs down at him as he snaps his latex gloves into place over green scrubs.

'Good news and bad news,' he says, piggy little eyes travelling over the Omega's slim torso, lingering on the crooked, curving scar across his abdomen. 'The good news is: until recently, a full face transplant was almost unthinkable. But,' he grins, 'medical science is a fast-moving train.' Leaning down, he pinches Will's cheek between forefinger and thumb in a twisted parody of affection. 'First,' he growls, 'I'll lift your pretty mush right off. *Then*…' He strokes and cups the Omega's chin. '… I'll expose the blood vessels and major connections of Mason's face, and then lay yours straight on top.'

He straightens up, staring down with dark, glittering eyes.

'You really are *done*, y'know.' Hatred twists his lips. 'That's the bad news.'

His watch beeps and he smiles.

‘Time to fetch Mason.’ Then, as if sharing a great joke, adds, ‘Don’t you go anywhere.’

He walks away again, and, for another eternity, there’s only the click of Will’s blinking eyes, the beep of the heart monitor and the rush of air in and out of defiant lungs.

I’m still alive. There’s still a chance that, somehow, I can get out of this.

The hope fizzles and dies when Cordell returns, pushing Mason before him, the crippled Beta prepped for surgery and wearing red pajama scrubs to hide any blood from the operation.

‘Ah,’ the Verger says, his gaze lighting up when he sees Will, clamped and immobile, ready to be exploited for his own benefit. ‘Cordell told me if I waited long enough, he could grow me a new face from my own cells.’ He looks sideways at the other man, trusting his attendant to care for him.

Cordell slips a fresh needle into the canular in Mason’s arm, attaching him to an IV drip of fluid.

‘But I was adamant it was *your* face I wanted,’ Mason says, gazing at the profile of the Omega, with the light shining behind him and gold radiating from his eyes. ‘I was looking at *your* face while you were watching me cut *mine* off, and I thought, “ooh, that’s a *nice* face”.’

‘You’re going under now, Mr Verger,’ Cordell says, readying the anesthetic. ‘When you wake up, your face will be bound and uncomfortable.’

Mason nods, just once, preparing himself for his transformation.

If he takes enough of the Omega, will be become something more than Beta himself?

In the Bible, Jesus died an Omega and rose again, an Alpha. The highest caste of mankind. Recreated in God’s own image.

‘Have you accepted Jesus, Mr Graham?’ he asks, his head starting to swim as the sedative enters his bloodstream. ‘Do you have *faith?* I do. I’m *free*.’ Darkness presses against the edges of his mind and he feels himself slipping into a warm bath, cradled and comforted in the presence of the Divine. ‘*Hallelujah*.’

Once Mason settles into silence, Cordell moves around to the Omega’s table. He takes another syringe, attached to an IV bag hanging above Will’s head, and uncaps the needle.

‘*This* will support the clamp to immobilize your body,’ he says, flicking out the air bubbles from inside, ‘but you’ll continue to *feel* everything.’

He slides the needle into the crook of Will’s elbow, injecting him full of a paralytic that makes his muscles seize and cramp. The bite on his cheek, expertly sewn back on and barely hidden beneath a Band-Aid, seems to pulse, and he says, very deliberately, as he stares down into Will’s wide, terrified eyes,

‘I’m going to cut off your face without anesthesia, Mr Graham.’

I'm going to make you wish you were dead, and then deny it to you.

***

The air is thick with the taste of copper. Screams of pain resonate within the walls, fading to choked, burbling moans as shock claims the lives of the less fortunate Sardinian guards.

Hannibal had killed most of them with quick, brutal blows to their heads. His clothes, rescued from the bag in the corner of the pig barn, are damp with blood and sweat, and he wipes a forearm across his forehead, leaving behind a smear of red.

The hammer in his hand drips with bits of ragged scalp.

'I told you I would kill you quickly,' he says, pacing around the crippled guard sobbing at his feet. 'If you cared for Will when I asked.' He smiles, raising the blunt weapon above his head. 'Much as I want to make this last, I have a schedule to keep.'

He brings it smashing down onto the other man's skull and bone splinters. Blood sprays, and the force expels one of the Alpha's bloodshot eyeballs before he collapses onto his back, limbs still twitching as dying nerves fire.

Satisfied with his work, Hannibal steps over the corpse and begins to hunt his next target. Will's scent is getting stronger, leading him out of the patio doors and into the icy winter air of the Verger estate terrace.

His breath billows and heat shimmers around him, testament to the fire raging through his veins. His dark dragon revels in the glory of slaughter and he bares red teeth at the night sky, his belly full of fresh meat.

Hold on, Will. I'm coming for you.

***

Spurred on by the broken shouts and gurgling screams of dying men downstairs, Margot and Alana race through the bedrooms of the upper floors. The surrogate has to be around here somewhere; she *has* to be. Mason wouldn't risk the baby's health and wellbeing to an outbuilding, and if she's a willing host then he'll want to keep her warm and comfortable.

They burst into one of the rooms near to their childhood nursery and, at the sight before her, all the air goes out of Margot's lungs.

No.

A giant sow, her belly round and swollen with young, lies sedated on a canopied bed. Above her, nestled around the string of little heat lamps, is a pig-inspired mobile, and an ultrasound monitor shows the grainy image of a fetus.

She's been bred specifically for this purpose. Her body has been genetically altered to enable the surrogacy of a human child and she's been a placid host for nine months.

Alana, bile scratching the back of her throat, approaches the monitor. It's a little boy, but she can't see signs of life.

'Is he alive?' Margot whispers, her eyes shining gold, and Alana turns at the sharp scent of distress from her mate.

She inspects the vital signs on the second monitor, her chest tightening and heart sinking at the flat, hopeless lines on black.

'There's no fetal heartbeat,' she says, looking down at the sow.

How long has the baby been dead? Had Mason planned for it to die now, just before giving it to Margot? Or had its death been an accident?

Panic snatches the air from Margot's lungs. She feels suffocated, like she herself is trapped inside the stifling, rotting womb.

Like she's trapped beneath Mason again, just like when they were children. His teeth in her neck, his hands pinning her down as he violates her again and again.

'Take it out!' she hisses, and Alana knows that if she doesn't cut open the pig, her Omega will claw it open with her bare hands. She needs her baby. She needs to hold her baby, just once, before she says goodbye.

***

Cordell hums to himself as he draws little dashes around the edge of Will's face, neat and precise where he wants to make the incisions. At the delicious, salty stench of fear from the paralyzed Omega, and the barely choked back whimper, he lets a smug, cruel grin stretch his lips back from yellow teeth.

'You be sure to let me know if this hurts, won't you?' he taunts, eagerly anticipating the sounds of agony soon to be ripped from the stupid 'meg's *precious Omegan* throat. The screams that will, inevitably, follow, even as he ignores every plea for mercy and separates flesh from nerve.

Fuck you, Will thinks, fighting to hold in the pathetic little whines crawling past tightly-clenched lips. *Fuck you, I won't scream. I won't. I won't. No matter how bad it gets.*

The first slice of the scalpel is cold, sharp pain. He takes a sharp breath in, woozy from the knowledge that it's started, that's it's really happening, and wonders how someone can be so much worse than Hannibal.

Please, he thinks, throwing himself through the trapdoor of his Memory Palace and bolting it shut behind him, scrambling down the passageways towards the welcoming darkness of the dungeons and the memory of his Alpha lingering there. *Please, let me pass out.*

The blade goes deeper, the pain reaches a new level and then he's floating, drifting away into blissful nothingness, and the last thing he remembers is a purr. Low, and deep, and proud.

Hannibal.

***

As the scalpel cuts muscle from bone, peeled back to reveal a row of teeth clenched in a rictus of pain, Alana slices open the sow's belly to get at the uterus. She tugs stinking intestines out of the carcass and digs through the slop to reach the fetus in its sac of fluid.

The little body is cold, and feels achingly fragile in her shaking hands. Margot waits with a towel, ready to wrap up her brother's final act of torture. She makes instinctive hushing sounds, tucking the material around the tiny limbs and cradling it to her chest. She can't keep the horror from her face and broken mewls slip past her lips even as she drips tears onto the baby's head.

She would have been such a good mother. She knows she would have, if Mason had given her the chance.

You took everything from me. Hannibal's right; you'll always deny me.

***

Hannibal kicks open the door to the makeshift operating theater, startling Cordell. The Beta, dressed in green surgical scrubs with a bloody scalpel in his hand, turns from the bound, immobile figure of Will, and Hannibal sees the first cut made on his beloved's cheek.

One cut too many.

Moving quickly and without ceremony, he crosses the distance and swings the hammer at the burly Beta's face.

Cordell ducks, avoiding the blow, and slashes with the scalpel. Hannibal, predicting the move, feints to the left and knocks a tray of instruments into the other man so that he staggers. Then, before Cordell can recover, he drops to a crouch and swings low with the hammer once again.

Metal connects with the Beta's legs and his shin bone shatters. Cordell falls with a scream of furious pain, grabbing the broken, bleeding mess, and Hannibal hits him once more, catching him across the temple with a calculated amount of force to make him dizzy and helpless, but without knocking him out.

I've got you, Will.

He looks down into the sightless, glassy eyes of his beloved, taking a moment to admire the other man's bound, helpless position, and then tightens the crest clamp another degree, forcing Will to lose consciousness.

His former mate has been through enough pain. Time for him to rest, now. Hannibal will protect him.

Cordell is heavy but Hannibal's anger lends additional strength to his limbs. He heaves the fat Beta onto a spare surgical table and straps him down, securing him, just as Cordell did with Will. Then, seeing the original intention in the panicked blue eyes, he does to him what Cordell had planned to do to Will.

The scalpel slides through skin. Blood flows, a delicate thin line. Hannibal, his hands covered in surgical gloves, gently levers skin away from facial bones, revealing teeth clenched in agony and a jaw beneath. Cordell's face comes away from its moorings, transplanted, very carefully, onto Mason's hideous, mutilated one, smearing blood where it touches the raw, waiting skin.

He fastens the dying man's face in place with a few neat stitches and then secures the transplant with the plastic mask and neck cuff. It won't do to have the skin slide off before Mason has a chance to appreciate his effort.

'Oh, Mason,' he murmurs, gazing down at the broken, defeated Beta lying vulnerable and unconscious before him. 'You just can't win, can you?'

He senses Alana and Margot in the doorway and turns to find the two women hovering at the threshold. Alana's face pales when she looks beyond Hannibal's bloody gloves and scrubs to see Cordell, faceless, the monitors showing a distinct lack of life signs.

Shock can be such a deadly thing, after all.

'As much as I detest the idea of inbreeding,' Hannibal says, taking care to move slowly whilst ignoring the gun held in Alana's steady right hand, 'I would recommend using Mason's sperm to fertilize your eggs, Margot.' He quirks an eyebrow. 'Best way to ensure a true Verger heir. His –' He nods down at the masked Beta, and then at the tear-stained face of the Omega behind Alana. 'And yours.'

'Mason has no feeling below the chest,' Alana says, frowning at him. 'How do you propose we resolve that?'

'Simple.' Hannibal holds up the wicked cattle-prod he had taken from one of the more aggressive guards. The man had screamed beautifully when Hannibal burned his eye out with the probes. 'A jolt of electricity to the prostate gland and Bob's your Uncle.' He grins, his red eyes dancing with good humor. 'Or, rather, Mason's the father of your baby.'

Margot and Alana share an uneasy glance, but they both know it's the safest way to ensure an uncontested heir. With Margot's eggs cryogenically stored they can try first with Mason's sperm – his living descendent would secure the fortune – and then move onto her own supply if it doesn't take.

'Show me how,' Alana says, handing Margot the gun and stepping closer to the man who tried to kill her. The man who killed and *ate* one of her closest friends, and who fucked her just to distract and confuse her.

The man she set free, to save Will's life.

‘I’ll show you the basics,’ Hannibal says, unceremoniously rolling Mason’s limp, unresponsive body onto its side, heedless of the way it crushes his arm under him. ‘But then Will and I really must be going.’ He looks across at the unconscious Omega, still strapped to the surgical gurney and bleeding from the latest cut to his face. ‘We have a lot to talk about.’

***

Something doesn’t feel right.

Mason comes round from the anesthetic with dry mouth and a headache. He’s upright in his wheelchair, his face crushed under warm pressure. A mask blocks his vision at the edges and Mason tastes copper when he flicks his tongue out.

Why can he still feel the scarred remnants of his old lips? Where are the gauze bandages he was expecting? Where’s the smell of antiseptic?

More importantly, where the hell is Cordell?

Breathing hard and fast, fighting down panic at how vulnerable he feels, Mason reaches up with his good hand and tugs the neck brace from his throat. He still has the plastic mask over his face, the one he’d worn for months to protect the tender, still-healing skin following grafts, but he shouldn’t need it for this surgery.

Pulling it off, Mason gasps for breath that feels blocked at the pinprick holes of his collapsed nose. There’s still something on his face, feeling like another mask.

‘Cordell?’

He tries to keep the panic from his voice, but he can hear a wobble and he despises it.

‘CORDELL?!’

Reaching for the little vanity mirror beside him, he lifts it up and gapes, horrified, at the reflection.

Cordell’s face stares back at him, eyeholes wide and unseeing, mouth slack and bitten cheek tinged blue with death.

The severed face of his personal attendant slides off, leaving Mason’s forehead and cheeks smeared with blood, and panic throws Mason’s caution to the wind.

No! No! No! No, no, no! This can’t be happening!

***

High in a tree on the edge of the Verger estate, Chiyoh trains her rifle on the bloodied figure in black carrying an unconscious Omega in his arms.

Hannibal’s face is lined with exhaustion and smeared with blood, his eyes shining red through the streaks. Rut, it seems, is the only thing keeping him going. He wades through

knee-deep drifts, his breath billowing and sweat pouring down his forehead, occasionally looking down as if to remind himself of the precious cargo in his arms.

Staggering, he doesn't have the strength to outrun the guards chasing after him. Will may be slight, but he's still a man and his dead weight is clearly a strain on injured shoulders. Hannibal can't keep going for much longer; a lesser Alpha would have collapsed by now, but even his strength has its limit.

Chiyoh squeezes the trigger and red mist stains the air, freezing into petals that spray across the white snow. Another shot and the last guard falls, leaving Hannibal free to continue his journey towards the service road beyond the trees, and the old pickup truck that Chiyoh has waiting for him there.

It's good to have family.

***

'Cordell!' Mason wails, throwing the mirror aside so he can wheel himself over to the dresser to grab his emergency handgun. 'Cordell!'

'Hi, Mason.'

Alana's voice is cool and calm, and she stares with undisguised contempt at the bloodstained Beta swirling around in his electric wheelchair, looking every inch the scared, pathetic little boy he is.

At the sight of his Alphan psychiatrist, standing there like a prissy idiot in the doorway, Mason's fear gives way to rage.

'What the hell's going on out there?' he demands, vowing punishment on everyone in the house. 'Where's Cordell?'

'Cordelle's dead,' Alana says, the crimson rings in her eyes thickening to swallow the blue of her irises. 'They're all dead out there. Hannibal got away.'

'What?!' Mason shrieks. 'Well get on the horn to Washington! Get four of those bastards with guns up here! NOW! Send the helicopter!'

Alana ignores his demands, looking over towards her Omega as Margot enters from the other doorway.

With her cheeks puffy and streaked with mascara, golden eyes bloodshot and still leaking tears, Margot glares balefully at her brother. She wants him to see, one last time, how much he's hurt her.

She wants him to know, before she kills him, just how much she *hates* him.

'I found your *surrogate*, Mason.'

Mason smirks at her, impatient with her Omegan theatrics.

Papa should have drowned her at birth. Waste of space, all Omegas were.

‘*Your* surrogate, Margot,’ he hisses. ‘I promised you I’d give you a Verger baby.’

Margot shakes her head, another tear splashing free.

‘I’m *taking* what you *promised* me,’ she says, and then, glancing towards the portrait of their father, hanging over the fireplace, she sighs. ‘And I’ve got everything I need from you, now.’

‘You can’t kill me, Margot,’ Mason sneers, eyes glittering with hate. ‘You’ll lose *everything*.’

Your money. Your freedom. Your home.

‘“In the absence of a legitimate male or Alphan heir, the sole beneficiary will be The Southern Baptist Church”.’

‘But there *is* going to be an heir, Mason.’ Margot’s hurt is fading, sliding into fury after so many years of resentment. ‘A Verger baby. Yours… Mine…’ She rolls her eyes. ‘Mostly *yours*.’

‘Do you know what happens if we stimulate your prostate gland with a cattle prod?’ Alana asks, taking joy in the dawning horror on the crippled Beta’s face. ‘Hannibal does. He helped us milk you.’

Mason looks from Alpha to Omega, fury battling disgust at being abused by them.

‘You’re *dead*, Dr Bloom,’ he snarls, but Alana doesn’t flinch at the threat.

‘Oh, Mason,’ she replies, thinking back to Hannibal’s dark, soulless eyes, and the swift ease with he killed over a dozen Alphas on the estate. ‘We all are. Didn’t you know that?’ She holds up a little test-tube of white semen. ‘But *these* aren’t.’

As Mason fumbles to cock his handgun, having no real knowledge of how to use it, Margot lunges at him. She knocks him from his chair and tackles him to the ground, smacking him in the face as she does.

The gun goes off, the bullet zipping through the air to shatter the thick glass of the tank.

Mason and Margot fall into the water, their heads submerged as they press against liquid with nothing to hold onto.

Margot, having the full use of her back, rears backwards and leaves Mason to sink into the tank. Alana rushes to help her, pulling her to safety, and then they both hold Mason under with their hands.

The Moray eel, excited by the panicked thrashing in its waters, swims closer to investigate. At the scent of blood, its hunting instincts kick in and it takes an experimental bite of Mason’s chin.

Finding the gristle and bone unsatisfying, the eel regroups and forces its bolt cutter shaped head into the gaping hole of its master's mouth. It takes hold of Mason's tongue, back-curved teeth clicking together in a way that no fish can ever escape from, and Mason starts to drown. Blood and water fill his lungs, burning him from the inside, and then, as the eel begins to eat, his body sinks to the bottom of the tank.

Alana and Margot wait, watching to be sure he's dead, and then they take their prize and leave.

It's over. And they've won.

***

'How did you find us?' Hannibal asks, glancing at the stoic Japanese Omega in the passenger seat beside him before focusing again on the dark, snow-covered highway yawning out ahead of the truck headlights.

'I questioned the Alpha you left behind,' Chiyoh replies, leather-gloved hands still clasping her rifle, which is propped up between her legs. 'The FBI Agent.'

'Jack's still alive?' Hannibal smiles and hums thoughtfully, contemplating his emotional response to that. 'Good for Jack.'

Chiyoh looks over her shoulder at the braced, unconscious Omega lying on the backseat.

'I thought you were going to kill him,' she murmurs, curious about the perverse relationship between the two men. 'Because he went to Italy to kill you.'

'I almost did,' Hannibal admits, checking his former mate in the rearview mirror. 'I cut into his head to eat his brain as a means of keeping the best part of him with me forever.'

'I saw,' Chiyoh says coolly, and Hannibal chuckles.

'You disapprove.'

'It's not my place to judge you,' Chiyoh sighs, returning her gaze to the windshield. 'You changed the night Mischa died. You became opaque, as if a part of you froze inside forever to get away from the pain.'

'And yet you stayed with me,' Hannibal says, taking the turning towards Wolf Trap. 'Even after the Lady Murasaki returned to Japan. Why was that?'

'I made a promise,' Chiyoh says, setting her jaw against any further questions.

Hannibal allows the silence to breathe between them, broken only by the whir of the truck heaters and the crunch of snow under tires.

When the farmhouse finally comes into view, shrouded in darkness and bereft of life, Hannibal feels a pang of regret for the life they'd had together, and for everything they could have had.

A family. A surrogate daughter and a baby of our own.

‘I need to get Will inside,’ he says, cutting the engine and removing the keys from the ignition. ‘Chiyoh, would you mind checking the perimeter? I’d feel safer knowing you’re watching out for me.’

‘I’m always watching out for you,’ Chiyoh says, slipping quietly from the car. ‘It’s all I know.’

Watching her melt into the shadows of the early morning, Hannibal sighs. His time with Chiyoh may be coming to an end, and he will miss her.

He pulls Will from the backseat and carries him up the side steps of the porch, using the keys taken from Will’s rescued suit to unlock the front door.

The house is silent and cold when he steps inside. The floor squeaks, the boards pickled with tears and wet pawprints, stained and shrunken. The large windows encourage moonlight to enter the room, leeching the color from the furniture and throwing the white baby romper on the back of the couch into sharp relief.

Hannibal stares, uncomprehending, and then looks down at Will. At the Omega he’d Bonded, impregnated, and then Cut, seeking to release him from the shackles of a relationship so clearly detested.

The light of a true mating bond won’t reach us for a million years, that’s how far away from true mates we are.

Will had spoken those words to him once before, after being imprisoned for the murders of Cassie Boyle, Marissa Schurr, Dr Sutcliffe, Georgia Madchen and Abigail Hobbs. Hannibal had thought Will’s opinion of him had changed once he understood the reasons behind the torture, but had all been a lie.

It is only through pain that we can learn who we truly are. I had to break you, mylimasis, the way I was broken, so that you could rebuild yourself into your true image. So that you could be stronger than ever before.

Remembering the kitchen in Baltimore on that fateful night, Hannibal feels again the ripping agony of his own crest splitting and cracking, dying skin peeling away from his throat as his Bond to Will shattered. He’d been careful with the cuts; deep but not paralyzing, and he’d meant to kill the baby quickly and cleaning, to save it any unnecessary suffering. After the Nuchalectomy, Will would most likely have miscarried anyway. At least, after being gutted, he would only blame Hannibal. He wouldn’t turn any of that delicious wrath inwards and punish himself.

Our baby survived? Hannibal lowers his head and brushes his lips across Will’s stitched and bloody forehead, scenting him before placing a gentle kiss to the bruised skin. *You’re even stronger than I’d hoped.*

He places Will on the double cot bed still set up in the far corner of the sitting room, wondering if Will sleeps down here as a means of guarding his child. How often does the other man lie awake at night, staring out into the darkness and waiting for monsters to appear?

I would stay up with you, beloved, he thinks, tucking the blankets around Will to keep him warm as he slept. *I would protect our child from the demons.*

The house is as he remembers it, and he navigates it easily in the darkness. The space heater hums as the wires glow red, casting a soft glow on the walls of the hearth and across the threadbare rugs where Will's dogs normally sleep. *Who has them?* Hannibal wonders, judging their departure from the house to be less than a week by the dust sitting on top of the water in their bowls. *Is it the same person who has our baby?*

Quashing the instinct to rage and demand that his child be returned immediately, Hannibal moves again to the kitchen. He sets the kettle on the stove to boil and fires up the boiler, seeking the warm the little house before either of them bathe.

A stuffed animal sits on the rickety stairs leading up to the first floor and Hannibal's heart skips a beat as he picks it up. Multiple scents cling to the polyester fabric, new layered on top of old. Will, faded, and another man related to him but Beta. His father, no doubt. An infant, sweet with innocence and creamy with the smell of milk. Dogs, laundry detergent and –

Hannibal frowns, rolling the toy between his hands. He can't be certain, it doesn't make sense, but he can smell two distinct scents. Two sets of chubby little hands, grasping fingers burrowing deep into the fur. Two curious mouths gumming at the snout, smearing the bear muzzle with spit and formula.

He was carrying twins.

Fear chases relief, a dizzying rush that steals the strength from his legs. Hannibal catches himself on the wall, breathing hard, and then takes the stairs two at a time, hurrying from the empty master bedroom to the nursery at the far end of the hall.

'*O Dieve*,' he whispers, glancing upwards towards Heaven as he freezes in the doorway.

Before him, bathed in the silver light of the winter moon, are two identical cribs. They each have a mobile hanging above the bars, one of fish, the other of dogs. Books are piled, haphazardly, on crooked shelves along the wall, intermingled with plush animals and brightly colored building blocks.

There is a changing table in the corner, stacked with diapers and romper suits, and Hannibal sways, his vision turning gray, at the sight of the little plastic bathtub leaning against the wall.

Mischa's bathtub is on the stove where the Cooker boils the little deer's horned skull with some shriveled tubers. The roiling water bangs the horns against the metal walls of the tub as though the little deer is making a last effort to butt.

Wooden letters, painted in pastel shades of pink and blue, hang from the wall above each crib.

Grace. Daniel.

I have children, Hannibal thinks, and sinks, slowly, to the floor, hugging the toy to his chest as tears fall silently from his eyes. *I still have a family.*

In that moment, surrounded by the scents of his Omega and his children, he vows to do whatever it takes to atone for his sins. This is his second chance, and he will not squander it.

***

Will wakes sometime before dawn, staring up at the ghostly shadows of the branches playing across the ceiling above his bed.

My face…

He remembers the sting of the scalpel slicing through his skin; remembers the whisper of the blade as it severs the delicate tissue, and he half-expects the agony of exposed nerves to hit the moment he opens his eyes. When it doesn't come, tears well and he huffs a sobbing laugh, stroking over and over the tender but intact skin.

What happened?

He sits up, realizing he's in his bed, in the farmhouse in Wolf Trap.

Gracie. Danny.

Throwing the covers back, he staggers under the weight of his own body, his legs still weak after being clamped so viciously. He catches himself on the side dresser and hauls himself forwards, his foggy brain slowly registering the ugly pinstripe shirt still chafing at his neck.

Tugging the collar open, he snaps button threads in his haste to remove it – he doesn't want *anything* of his time at Mason Verger's estate still touching his skin when he checks on the twins.

The nursery door is open, spilling gray early morning light onto the landing, and Will throws the shirt to the floor as he nears the room.

It's not his Pops inside, but Hannibal, holding up one of the crocheted blankets and rubbing the scent across his cheek, purring softly. Will stops dead, swaying as gray spots swarm his vision, making his lips tingle.

'Hannibal,' he whispers, clutching the door for support before he falls. 'I…'

He sees the Alpha's eyes glisten with tears and loses all words, along with his breath. His lungs shrink, too small for his chest, and he stumbles forwards, part of him meaning to rip the blanket out of Hannibal's unworthy hands, the other part of him desperate to sink into his arms and just be held.

Somehow, the two actions merge. Will tugs the blanket and yanks Hannibal towards him, using the movement to spin them both around and slam the Alpha up against the wall. There's a moment, when his darkness swells inside him like a tidal wave, where he wants nothing more than to sink his teeth into Hannibal's throat and coat himself in arterial spray, but then the urge passes and he just stares, trembling with unspent energy.

'"Night heron revealed, By the rising harvest moon –"' Hannibal murmurs, gazing down into Will's face with open adoration. '"Which is lovelier?"' A pause and then, barely audible, 'Are they healthy?'

Misery clogs Will's throat. The nape of his neck prickles painfully, his scar aches and he's more exhausted than he's ever been.

'Don't come in here again,' he says, tugging the blanket out of the Alpha's grasp and ushering him out of the nursery. He closes the door firmly, putting the room, in no uncertain terms, off limits to Hannibal, and only then notices his lack of a shirt. 'I need to get dressed.'

'Will…' Hannibal watches, waiting for dark fury to replace the hollow sense of loss in the pit of his stomach, confused when it never comes. 'Will!'

Will pauses at the top of the stairs, looking back over his shoulder at the Alpha standing, desolately, outside the forbidden nursery.

'The twins are fine,' he says, sensing the desperation in his former mate's expression. 'There don't appear to be any *adverse* effects.'

Even if your blade did puncture the womb.

'Where are they?' Hannibal croaks, his fingers twitching in and out of shaking fists at his sides. 'Are they safe?'

Will sighs, and turns back to face the other man. He considers Hannibal, thinking of all the cruelty inflicted by him. Knowing a little of the cruelty done *to* him, which helped to shape the monster behind the veil.

I saw it… I suffered its wrath… And yet I loved you.

I still love you.

'They're safe,' he whispers thickly. 'From you. From *us*.' He shakes his head, a tear rolling down his cheek, and holds very still as Hannibal approaches. 'They deserve better.'

'They shall have the world,' Hannibal vows, cupping the side of Will's face and gazing into tortured golden eyes. 'And the very *best* father beside them.'

'We've both tried to free ourselves from each other,' Will says, holding Hannibal's hand to his cheek, drowning in the Alpha's crimson eyes, red sparks pinwheeling into darkness. 'We tried violence.'

Hannibal's breath catches, his pulse quickening as Will's scent thickens. Dipping his head closer, scant inches away from Will's lips, he holds himself steady, waiting for the Omega to make the first move.

'What do you suggest?' he whispers, every nerve firing in anticipation of the next move.

Their relationship has always been a dance. Beautiful and deadly; skating a razor's edge, one wrong step away from blood.

Will swallows, wondering if he's about to make another mistake. Wondering if he's ever been able to make his own choices when it comes to Hannibal. He leans in, pressing his mouth against the other man's, and pours all of his pain, his fear, his relief, into the kiss. He uses his free hand to pull Hannibal closer, needing to feel his familiar weight and strength against him, shielding him from the dangers of the world.

We almost died today. We should celebrate being alive.

It's a stupid thought; crude and instinctive, but Will is tired of fighting every urge. He slides his other hand through the Alpha's blood-crusted hair, parting his lips and deepening the kiss.

Hannibal claims Will's mouth with hungry abandon, ecstatic to touch him without hurting him, to feel the slim, powerful body press against him and beg for more.

'When Mason had you in his grasp,' he says, breaking the kiss only to nuzzle the Omega's jawline, scenting and marking him in turn, 'I knew the past was not the past at all. I felt again the beast that panted its hot stench on my skin.' He presses a reverent kiss to the freshly sewn cut on his cheek, where Cordell's scalpel cut deep. 'I almost lost you.'

'You tried to *eat* me,' Will growls, tilting his head away and returning the affection, rasping his tongue across Hannibal's barely-scabbed wounds.

'I tried to *honor* you,' Hannibal corrects, and Will huffs, refusing to argue the semantics. Whatever the intention, the result would have been the same. Him, dead, his brain consumed by Hannibal, body left to rot.

Taking the Alpha by the hand, he leads him back downstairs. His Pops has been sleeping in the Master bedroom; he can't have sex if he can smell his father's scent on the sheets.

Am I really doing this? Am I really having sex with Hannibal again?

He expects to feel disgusted; ashamed of himself for his weakness, but this doesn't feel like fucking. It's something more intimate than that. Something more final.

'This is where you cut me,' he says, coming to a stop before his unmade bed and turning to face the Alpha. He guides Hannibal's hand to his abdomen and shivers as Hannibal's hot palm covers the scar, caressing the puckered skin with love bordering veneration.

'This scar is longer than the wound, Will,' Hannibal says, lowering himself to his knees before the Omega and pressing the first of many kisses to the silvering line. 'Did they cut the twins out of you, when the time came?'

‘They had to,’ Will replies, holding Hannibal’s head between his hands, watching him admire and commit every detail of the mark to memory. ‘They had to keep me sedated after you sliced off my crest.’

‘A lesser man would have died,’ Hannibal says, gazing up in awe. ‘Most would have lost their minds. You defied all expectations.’

Will thinks again of the teacup, falling from numb hands to shatter on an onyx surface. Splinters of the finest china, too many to count, causing irreparable damage.

‘Not so sure I didn’t,’ he mutters, but Hannibal just shakes his head and pushes him to sit back on the bed.

‘You’re so much stronger than you know, Will,’ the Alpha purrs, crawling on top on him when Will whimpers and beckons him closer. ‘I never thought I’d get to hold you again.’

‘Touch me,’ Will breathes, pulling him in for another kiss. ‘I want to feel you inside me.’

Hannibal trembles, moving them on the mattress so they can both lie flat, their legs entwined and arms chests pressed flush. Will’s fingers are swift to unbutton the shirt Hannibal took from one of the guards, palms spreading flat across the bruised, scraped skin of his chest.

‘I hate what they did to you,’ the Omega growls, tears of frustration pricking his golden eyes. He shakes his head, neck still throbbing from the old-fashioned brace clamp used by Cordell, and distracts himself by unbuckling his trousers. They’re the same suit trousers as he wore to the dinner table, and panic burrows beneath his skin before he can stop. ‘Get these *off* me!’

‘Ssh, sssh,’ Hannibal soothes, making quick work of the zipper and button, tugging the ruined material from Will’s legs. ‘There, you’re alright.’

‘Take it all off,’ Will insists, shoving at the boxers and socks still touching him. ‘I want to burn it.’

‘A wise decision,’ Hannibal replies, shimmying out of his stolen jeans. He hadn’t taken the guard’s underwear, and the too-big boots slip easily from his feet as the rest of the material falls in an unwanted heap on the floor. ‘Leave no trace of DNA.’

‘I don’t care about getting caught,’ Will says, stroking and squeezing Hannibal’s biceps and shoulders again. ‘I just want it *gone*.’

‘Nothing will remain but dust in the wind,’ Hannibal promises, covering Will’s body with his own. He rocks his hips down against a welcoming hardness and, for a while, there’s nothing but the rasp of skin on skin and the sounds of kissing, broken only by the low rumbles of Alphan and Omegan purring.

Will throws himself into the sensations quickly overwhelming his body. Pain flashes through him as he knocks cuts and bruises, but the ache of desire quickly fans into sharp lust and flames lick through his veins, tightening his muscles and heating his skin until his cheeks flush pink.

Hannibal touches him *everywhere*, gathering up slippery wetness and using it to ease him open. Their rhythm is practiced and quickly has him panting, barely able to concentrate on stroking Hannibal's erection as clever fingers find the perfect spot inside, sending white sparks cascading across his eyelids.

'Fuck me!' he gasps, clutching to the Alpha's broad shoulders as he rocks down onto the touch, chasing the pleasure with wanton abandon. 'Hannibal… *please…!'*

'I've got you,' Hannibal murmurs. He gets to his knees between Will's thighs and steadies himself, taking a deep breath as he begins to push, sliding inside the Omega, inch by torturous inch.

'*Fuck!'* Will grits his teeth, groaning at the ache, and then rolls his hips, pulling Hannibal all the way inside. He reaches up as the Alpha bows over him, wrapping his legs tight around Hannibal's waist and encouraging him in, deeper, always deeper. He wants to keep Hannibal with him, forever, and he understands, even more than before, why the Alpha wanted to eat him.

I don't ever want to be without you.

'You're incredible, Will,' Hannibal pants, gazing down at Will's fierce golden eyes and flushed, sweaty face, worshipping every part of him. 'Incredible.'

'I don't know *what* I am,' Will replies, arching his back and shuddering as waves of pleasure chase each other up and down his spine. 'God, Hannibal, you feel so *good*.'

They kiss again, abandoning the effort to talk in favor of licking and suckling each other's necks, scenting and marking in turn. Their hands never stop moving; fingers gripping tight, stroking and smoothing hair, squeezing muscles and lightly scratching with nails. Their lovemaking is slow, the physical sensations wrung from their battered, exhausted bodies made all the sweeter by the shimmering thread of emotion stretched between their minds.

I love you, the kisses say, even as hands worship soft skin and scabbed cuts.

I forgive you, the touches say, fingers tracing and covering every scar left in the wake of their dysfunctional relationship.

I'm leaving you, Will thinks, clinging to Hannibal as they both tumble over the edge and into blissful orgasm, bodies shuddering with release, knot sealing them together. He lets himself cry, silent tears streaming down his face even as he rides the high, and Hannibal kisses the dampness away, his own cheeks equally wet.

Later that morning, hours after their bodies have separated again, Will lies silently in Hannibal's arms, content to just listen to the sleeping Alpha's heartbeat. He knows he has to tell him. He has to make him leave, but not just yet. They still have time. A window of freedom where the world outside has fallen away, and all that matters is right now.

Soon enough, the window will close. But, until then, they're together again.

***

After showering, Hannibal dresses in dark slacks and a navy shirt, courtesy of the small selection of his clothes still hanging in Will's closet. Then, wrapping himself in a thick black coat, another remnant of their life together, he leaves the other man to sleep and goes outside to find Chiyoh.

His decision has been made. His children are alive, and he will do whatever it takes to be in their lives.

The young Omega stands at the edge of the front yard, staring out at a flock of ravens leaving inky smudges against the white sky. She's still carrying the rifle, and turns when she hears the porch door open and shut.

Watching her approach, her dark eyes wary, like a zookeeper monitoring the movements of a lion, Hannibal wonders how he ever thought she could be his companion.

There's nobody but Will.

'Will you go home?' he asks, looking out over the wilderness where his children will grow up without him. A glance at her, eyes narrowing in suspicion. *'Can* you go home?'

'No more than you can,' Chiyoh replies, grimacing at the reality of her situation. She is still betrothed, after all, to a high-ranking Alpha. She would be one of many in his harem, dressed in finery like a living doll before being bred like a broodmare. A fate she could not stand, and something she will forever be running from.

Even if she had wanted to return, she'd made a commitment to remain with Hannibal, for Mischa's sake. She'd been so close to the younger girl, both in age and caste, and she had vowed to always protect the Lecter heir, no matter what.

When Hannibal and Mischa had been taken, the boy she knew had died out in the snow, with a chain frozen to the skin of his neck. Only a demon remained.

'Would you watch over me?' Hannibal asks, perhaps sensing her thoughts. Perhaps smelling the distress and devotion in her scent, and interpreting its meaning.

'I will,' Chiyoh promises, but her eyes flare gold as she adds, sadly, 'Not in a cage. Some beasts shouldn't *be* caged.'

It only makes them more dangerous.

'Your obsessive and successful hunt,' Hannibal says, approaching slowly with hands deep in his pockets. 'Whose plight was it driven by? Mine? Yours?'

'Mischa's,' Chiyoh whispers, a tear freezing in place on her cheek. She sees Hannibal control a flinch, fighting his instincts, and she knows she has to ask. Now, before it's too late.

She may never have this chance again.

‘Did you eat her?’

Hannibal considers her for a moment; considers the gun in her hands and the adoration in her eyes.

‘Yes,’ he replies, seeing no reason to lie. ‘But I did not kill her.’

She was already dead when they gave me her arm to chew on.

Chiyoh nods, grateful for the truth, and Hannibal continues, deliberately and purposefully,

‘The most stable elements, Chiyoh, appear in the middle of the periodic table, roughly between iron and silver.’ He steps closer, lips curving and eyes burning red, dipping his head to murmur again, ‘Between iron and silver. I think that’s appropriate for you.’

***

‘Fate and circumstance have returned us to this moment. When the teacup shatters.’

It’s dark in his mind, and madness waits.

White china, edged with gold, whisper-thin and delicate. A fragile thing. Reserved for special occasions.

The cup falls, slowly, as if from a great height. Will watches, feeling a part of his mind fall with it, and he wakes as it breaks, the back of his neck throbbing.

Hannibal.

It’s afternoon; he can tell by the quality of the light. He’d drifted off again after lunch, warm and safe under the covers, a soft fleece shirt against his skin, wrapped in the mingled scents of him and Hannibal.

As if summoned by the thought, the Alpha enters the house through the front door, stamping fresh snow from his boots. He keeps his coat on, perhaps fighting off the chill of the old house, and pauses when he sees that Will is awake.

Will sighs, hating the pleased smile lingering on Hannibal’s lips. He can still taste the other man in his mouth, still smell him on his fingers, but their time together has come to an end and the world is waiting.

His children are waiting.

Easing himself into a seated position, muscles aching from the beating he’d suffered at Muskrat Farm, he watches Hannibal approach the bed, the silence growing ever more brittle between them.

Hannibal looks down at the notebook he’d left behind; pages filled with the symbols of both astrophysics and particle physics. They are repeated efforts with the symbols of string theory, beginning brilliantly and then declining, doomed to fevered, wishful thinking, and he regards

them with regret before closing the book and sitting in the mustard-yellow armchair he's dragged across from the sitting area.

'Do we talk about teacups and time,' he murmurs, crossing one leg over the other and closing the notebook on his lap, hands clasped loosely over it. 'And the rules of disorder?'

'The teacup's broken,' Will replies, shaking his head. 'It's never going to gather itself back together again.'

I'll never be whole again, and we'll never be a family.

'Not even in your mind?' Hannibal asks, unable to keep the desperate plea from his voice. If Will can recover, if he can accept and forgive him, just enough, then there's still a chance.

He can still undo what he's done. He can still make it right.

Will sighs, his eyes swirling with gold, and Hannibal knows, if he pushes too far, the Omega will bolt.

'Your Memory Palace is building,' he continues. 'It's… full of new things.' He thinks of the Norman Chapel in Palermo, and the additional doors now leading from the intricate foyer. Of the old cuckoo clock in his Hall of Clocks, constructed of salvaged parts and always striking two minutes after the hour. 'It shares some rooms with my own.'

Will nods; he's sensed Hannibal in his own mind. Their connection, after all, is how he found him. Their Bond may have collapsed but they still think in the same way.

He's not sure he'll ever be truly free of the other man.

'I've discovered you there,' Hannibal adds, his voice rich and deep with a purr, eyes warm with pride. 'Victorious.'

Mouth slick with blood where you bit into Cordell's plump cheek. Knuckles red and eyes golden when you presented me with Randall Tier's corpse and told me to get on my knees.

Will thinks of the endless fights, the constant parry and thrust of trickery and betrayal; the quid pro quo of love and abuse, and he smiles sadly.

'When it comes to you and me,' he says, unable to take comfort in Hannibal's joy, 'there can be no decisive victory.'

Hannibal tilts his head, considering the statement.

'We are a zero-sum game,' he suggests, not altogether unhappy with the idea of it.

Nobody else has ever been worthy of such respect.

I can't win with you, Will thinks, sighing again. *And you can't win me back. Not after what you did.*

He looks around the room, at the empty dog beds and baby toys scattered on the floor.

‘I miss my kids,’ he murmurs, hoping the pack and the twins are happy on the houseboat with their grandpa Bill. He swallows, a sharp lump in his throat, and turns wet eyes to Hannibal. ‘But I’m not going to miss *you*.’

He sees the barb stick; sees the wound he inflicted back in Baltimore reopen. Hannibal’s fear of being unworthy, his deep-rooted belief that he’s undeserving of love come back to life. He wants to stop, to change his mind, but he can’t.

It has to be this way.

‘I’m not going to find you,’ he says, widening the chasm between them, shutting down any hope of a reconciliation. ‘I’m not going to look for you. I don’t want to know where you are, or what you do.’

Will… Please…

Hannibal holds himself very still, listening through the roaring in his ears as the Omega rejects him. He watches as Will sighs again, smelling salt in the air between them, and he hears the wobble as Will uses every ounce of remaining strength to hold back tears.

‘I don’t want to think about you, anymore,’ Will whispers, needing Hannibal to understand. To accept his decision.

I can’t do this anymore.

He can’t be a good father to their son and their daughter if he’s obsessing about Hannibal. He can’t raise their children to have happy, healthy lives if he knows where their fugitive parent is.

He can’t be complicit in anymore killing.

Hannibal looks to the side, composing himself before tears can fall. His chest aches, his heart is breaking in two and the front of his throat stings as if the Alphan crest is once more peeling off.

‘You delight in wickedness,’ he manages, ‘and then berate yourself for the delight.’

‘*You* delight,’ Will replies, his voice wobbling. ‘I *tolerate*.’ He swallows, the lump thickening. ‘I don’t have your *appetite*.’

He doesn’t. He has darkness inside him, a darkness that he fights with every fiber of his being, but he also has kindness and empathy. A goodness that Hannibal’s shadow instinctively seeks to destroy.

If he stays with him, he’ll lose the best parts of himself to that darkness, and his family will suffer for it.

They’re no good together.

‘Goodbye…’ *Alpha. Lover. Father of my children.* ‘Hannibal.’

He watches as Hannibal turns the conversation over in his mind, inspecting it from every angle. He sees the fury, the ugly rage, and then he sees Hannibal squash it, choosing not to use violence to force the issue.

He sees defeat dull the fire in Hannibal’s eyes, leeching them of color, and he knows he has truly changed the Alpha.

You feel again. And this hurts.

Hannibal opens his mouth to speak, thinks better of it, and nods. He gets up, adjusting his coat, and moves to the front door. Pausing to tighten the elastic strap on the notebook, he glances back one last time at Will, just in case the Omega has changed his mind, and, when he sees that Will is resolute, walks out of the house.

In the deafening silence that follows, Will allows a single tear to fall and then he leaves, retreating inwards where there is only empty black peace. The python tightens its coils around him once again and he surrenders himself to the madness of grief.

***

It’s late by the time the FBI arrive.

Jack steps out of the front SUV, still leaning heavily on a cane, his stitched tendon agony with every limping step on the snow of Will’s driveway.

The Omega, having seen the flashing blue and red lights from the house, steps out onto the porch, wearing a thick jacket to protect against the bitter cold. He’s wearing his glasses again, the gold of his eyes dulled with drops and his delicate Omegan scent crushed beneath layers of Beta scent and cologne.

Protection and deterrent to ward everyone away.

Two SWAT members enter the house, rifles at the ready, and Will sighs at the invasion.

‘He’s gone, Jack.’

Jack grits his teeth and turns his face away as he growls under his breath and his eyes pulse red. He doesn’t entirely blame Will for allowing the Alpha to escape; Hannibal was his mate and it’s doubtful he had much choice in the matter.

But it still narks him to know that the most dangerous serial killer is –

‘Jack.’

Hannibal’s voice comes from the direction of the barn and Jack swings around, staring as the Alpha in question appears out of the darkness, arms raised.

‘I’m here,’ Hannibal says, careful of the SWAT officers that rush to surround him, guns at the ready.

Chiyoh watches from her perch in a nearby tree, her own crosshairs aimed at Hannibal’s face but scope ready to swing to the side to take out the FBI agents at a moment’s notice.

The most stable elements, Chiyoh, appear in the middle of the periodic table, roughly between iron and silver.

Hannibal had spoken those words to her earlier. A keen student of Chemistry, she had immediately known that it was a clue; the most stable elements, of course, being the noble gases. But the elements between iron and silver included palladium and rhodium. Palladium; another word meaning to safeguard or protect. And rhodium; a most precious metal.

Safeguard my most precious.

As Hannibal sinks to his knees in front of Jack Crawford, Chiyoh lowers her gun. She will protect his children. She will watch them, as she watched Hannibal’s prisoner, and she will keep them safe in a way that Mischa was not.

‘You *finally* caught the Chesapeake Ripper, Jack,’ Hannibal says, smiling up at him as an officer moves his arms to the sides of his head, checking his coat pockets for hidden weapons.

‘I didn’t catch you,’ Jack growls, baring his teeth in an unpleasant smile. ‘You *surrendered*.’

You denied me the satisfaction of the catch. You made it your own choice.

‘I want you to know *exactly* where I am,’ Hannibal replies, and Will shivers as the words settle like a hot iron on the back of his neck, warming him from the inside. ‘And where you can *always* find me.’

I won’t abandon our children, Will. I won’t abandon you. Not again.

This is Hannibal’s apology. His atonement.

Will swallows, his belly writhing with excitement, joy and bitter fury, and he turns his back on the situation before he says something he’ll regret.

He’s not sure he’s ready to accept the gesture. Not yet. But Hannibal has just ensured that, when he’s ready, he’ll be waiting.

The Great Red Dragon

Chapter Summary

Hannibal has been imprisoned for six years and Will has made a new life for himself in Maine. But, when a new killer begins murdering whole families in their homes, Jack Crawford calls on him once again, and his former Alpha may be the only person who can help Will find The Tooth Fairy before time runs out.

TW: Mentions of rape (Mrs Leeds)

Chapter Notes

Hey peeps! Woohoo! We're officially into The Red Dragon arc of the story!!!

So, author's note: you'll see that I changed the imprisonment time from 3 years to 6. I made a similar tweak earlier in the season, to account for Will's pregnancy and recovery time. I debated whether to have the twins as toddlers, but given that Francis Dolarhyde is going to attack the house in the coming chapters, I didn't want it to seem too unreasonable that Molly manages to get out with them all safely. I couldn't imagine my nephew being as quiet as they'd need to be, so have adjusted their ages accordingly.

Anywho, notes on timescales aside, everything else should be canon-compliant. I also had the pleasure of re-reading the book to get some of the wording, so it's been a thoroughly enjoyable chapter to write.

I hope you enjoy reading!!!

I'm unlikely to post again for this story until the New Year, given how long it takes me to write at the moment, so I wish everyone a very happy holiday, however you're spending it, and a safe and happy new year xxx

EIGHT

The Great Red Dragon

He’s been changing for some time, now.

Francis Dolarhyde sits alone at the Formica table in the breakroom of the Gateway Corporation, St. Louis, Mississippi. He keeps his back to the rest of the room, where several Beta and Alpha coworkers chat amongst themselves. Their laughter rises above the tinned Muzak version of "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" playing over the speakers.

Francis is apart from them.

Different.

Alone.

The hand before him is strong and well-formed, but not a young one. It bears the scars of manual labor. The marks of a life half-lived.

A life wasted.

The landscape is vast. Desolate. An arid desert of deep troughs and patterned ridges. Empty as the surface of the moon.

There is nothing there. No life. No hope. No joy. Just the creased skin of a knuckle. The wrinkled, scarred flesh of a palm used to hard labor.

Scales, overlapping like the shining coils of a snake. Pale skin darkening into vibrant red and inky black.

Most Omegas are mated by their mid-twenties. Thirty, at the latest.

Today is Francis's forty-second birthday, and he is still alone. More so, than before, because last summer Grandmother finally succumbed to her dementia and passed away in her sleep.

As he stares, mesmerized by the undulating figures, Francis feels a rush as he truly *sees* it for the first time. Sees the imperfections.

The potential.

A Time magazine sits beside him. It features a retrospective of William Blake's work and, on the inner cover, a magnificent Red Dragon stretches for the sky. Its back ripples with muscles, tail wrapped possessively around the frightened Omega female beneath him and horns raised to the heavens as it challenges the very Creator for dominance. The Dragon is the epitome of a primal Alpha; raw power, dark, sensual desire, and a capacity for terrible violence to protect the one he has Claimed.

Alpha.

Francis lowers the other hand from before his mouth, his pulse beating a rapid staccato in his ears. He's normally ashamed of the ugly scar on his lip – testament to his cleft palate and lip surgery – but now he is too entranced by the power radiating from the Dragon. Too distracted by the strength pulsing from the grainy image.

Alpha.

He knows what he must do.

***

His training is brutal. His Omegan body rebels against the weights and presses, against the protein-heavy diet and supplements, but Francis has the Dragon to guide him and, soon enough, it relents, surrendering to the greater will.

In ancient times, Omegas would fight for the attention of an Alpha. They would chase and be chased, and were just as dangerous as their Alphan counterparts.

Two sides of the same coin. A little push, a subtle difference here and there, and gold eyes give way to red.

By the time his Heat hits, he can clean and press 300 pounds, and he doesn't allow the cramps or fever to stop his daily routine. Boxers soak up the slick, the fabric straining across an unforgiving erection, and he removes the rubber mat from the floor so as not to slip when he maintains each and every excruciating yoga pose.

One final Heat to burn away the last of the Omegan hormones.

His dedication is rewarded by a rush of pleasure crackling down his spine. Strength floods his muscles, making them bunch and shake, and Francis rolls his shoulders, baring his teeth at the drip-marks before his face.

Here it comes.

He can feel his body changing. He can feel the power growing inside. Making him so much more than a sniveling, pathetic Omega.

Making him more than a man.

After yoga, he lifts weights and then, as a means of stretching out his aching back and shoulders, pulls himself up using the gym hooks bolted to the support beam of the old Victorian roof. Wood and leather creak but the steel holds and Francis rises, ankles crossed behind him, suspended by his own brute strength as his eyes blaze fiery amber.

I'm ready.

***

The tattoo takes three sittings to complete. Francis travels to Hong Kong for the work, and buys Iris Inhibitor drops from a herbalist shop whilst he's there. He adds an infusion of bamboo extract and hibiscus powder to the solution, which stings like a bitch but creates a dull crimson gleam to his pupils and, by the time Grandmother's dentures have been replicated, his vision is no longer blurry.

The Alphan fangs are distinctive. They are powerful teeth. Vicious teeth.

His teeth.

Francis can feel the strength inside him all the time now. He sits alone at the table in the break room at work, marvelling at his own hands and seeing the changes so clearly now. Knowing the Betas and Alphas around him step aside when he walks down a corridor, and avert their eyes when he passes by.

Nobody will ever love a hare-lipped freak of an Omega, but he is becoming an Alpha.

He is becoming a Dragon.

***

The scents of The Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane are unpleasant. The lights are bright and unforgiving. The sounds that echo along tiled corridors and bounce off the high ceilings are sharp and filled with pain.

Hannibal Lecter, the most prestigious inmate in the history of the asylum, dips his head to taste the delicate aroma of expensive white wine and truffle mushroom. He imagines himself in his office; the sound of a fire crackling in the hearth behind him and bespoke furniture all around him.

He allows the aroma of the truffle to linger, then takes a sip of the wine. Appreciates its excellence. He is clad in a dapper plaid suit, polished brogues on his feet and hair neatly combed to the side.

Placing the wine glass back onto the desk before him, he looks across at Alana Bloom, sat in one of the patient armchairs opposite him.

‘Bâtard-Montrachet and *tartuffi bianchi*,’ he says, smiling in both jest and challenge. Alana, her lips painted the same jarring crimson as her nails, does not return it.

‘How I found you in Florence,’ she says coolly, arching one perfectly groomed eyebrow. Her blue eyes are thickly ringed with red, just as they always are whenever she comes here to visit him, and Hannibal can taste the salt of her nerves despite the restricted airflow of the conditioned room beyond the walls of his Mind Palace.

‘Betrayed by good taste,’ he murmurs, picking up the glass by its stem again and swirling the wine to release more of the flavor. ‘Is good taste itching away at you in your daily rounds of institutional life?’

The dig is more than a mere jab and they both know it. Alana has always despised clinical duty; to be the captor for so many mentally unwell patients. Even as a Beta it was repugnant to her, and yet, here she is, holding the keys to the cage in which he is trapped.

‘An itch easy enough to scratch when there’s cause to celebrate,’ Alana replies, adjusting her weight and re-crossing her legs. The red of her Chanel suit perfectly matches the shade of her makeup and the black striped shirt beneath is a dark backdrop for the bold color. She is making a statement; it is a dominant outfit, demanding attention and respect.

A true Alpha’s suit.

‘Congratulations, Hannibal,’ she adds, raising her own wine glass in toast. ‘You're officially insane.’

Hannibal is slow to sip; relishing each and every flavor balancing perfectly on his tongue. The wine slides down his throat, crisp and refreshing, and it is only after the memory of it fades that he replies, dismissively,

‘There’s no consensus in the psychiatric community *what* I should be termed.’

Alana narrows her eyes at him.

‘You’ve long been regarded by your peers in psychiatry as something entirely *Other*. For convenience, they term you a monster.’

‘What do *you* term me?’ Hannibal asks, regarding her with detached interest, a wall of professional courtesy between them, thicker than the toughened glass of his cell.

‘I don’t,’ Alana sighs, adding, before drinking more wine, ‘You *defy* categorization.’

‘Do you still prefer beer to wine?’ Hannibal asks, watching her sip more of the Bâtard-Montrachet. As expected, Alana tenses and her eyes flicker pure red.

‘I stopped drinking beer when I found out what you were *putting* in mine,’ she says, her insides clenching with disgust to know that her “special reserve” was a combination of blood, occasionally bile and, more often than not, Hannibal’s own semen.

‘“Who”,’ Hannibal corrects, pleased when Alana’s jaw tightens around a low snarl.

‘“Who”’,’ the other Alpha admits. She purses her lips, displeased with the direction of the conversation, and turns her face to the side.

The office scene fades; Hannibal allows it to dissipate, leaving him at the bolted steel table of his cell, sketching on paper magnanimously given as a reward for his good behavior.

‘This means you’ll be spared the federal death sentence,’ Alana continues, and then looks back at the captive Alpha, who somehow seems to make the white overall and rubber-soled shoes of the institution overalls work to his advantage.

Hannibal always has the ability to look as if he is here entirely of his own choosing.

As if he could leave at any moment.

‘They had enough to convict you a dozen times over,’ she adds, as if reminding herself of the charges heaped on the man’s blond head.

‘A baker’s dozen,’ Hannibal agrees, adding a flourish of graphite to the rendering of Alana as Botticelli’s *Fortitude.* ‘Lest we forget Mason Verger. You’re welcome.’

The reminder of his favor to her – to Margot – irritates Alana more than she’d like, and she grits her teeth again, forcing a snarl to come out as a breathless, incredulous laugh.

‘*You’re* welcome, Hannibal. The needle was *guaranteed* but you beat it all on an insanity plea!’

‘I’m not insane,’ Hannibal replies, as calmly and demurely as he did in Court the day that he was sentenced to be reprimanded for nine consecutive life terms at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

Alana rises from the wooden chair she had dragged into the center of the room, approaching the smooth wall of clear, thick glass.

‘You know that, and I know that,’ she says quietly, eyes shadowed as she watches Hannibal draw a chillingly accurate version of her in religious garb. ‘A dozen or a baker’s dozen... Enough people have died.’

It’s a plea. Small, unspoken, but it’s there. And Hannibal doesn’t miss it. He abandons the sketch and twiddles the pencil between his fingers, finally raising his dark, dead eyes to Alana’s pale face.

‘*You* haven’t,’ he says, with such cold assurance that all the fine hairs across the back of Alana’s neck stand on end.

‘A promise in waiting, isn’t it?’ Alana growls, her voice dropping to an icy hiss between tightly gritted teeth. ‘A promise you intend to keep.’

Hannibal smiles; the barest quirk of his lips, burgundy eyes flaring like the embers of distant fire, just stoked.

‘I *always* keep my promises.’

To you… And to Will.

***

Francis completes his speech therapy exercises every day at 6am. He plugs his ears with cotton wool and stands before the smashed full-length mirror that used to stand in Grandmother’s bedroom.

The vowels are easy enough. Ah, ah, ah. Oh, oh, oh.

The sibilant consonants are the real challenge to his mutilated mouth. He hates this part. Hates the lisp. The rasp. The slurring of his speech into something twisted and broken.

‘S… s…. ssss….’

He falters. Fails.

Useless!

Francis smacks himself upside the head. An Alpha would never fail as he has done. An Alpha would never give up.

Squaring his shoulders, he sets his jaw and tries again, glaring bitter hatred at the amber eyes of the stupid, ugly Omega in the mirror.

'S… six… six, six, six…'

Pride swells. Francis purrs but the sound feels too high. He cracks his jaw, opens his mouth wide and screams.

It is a primal sound. An Omega's keening plea for help.

For an Alpha.

In response, a rich, deep snarl reverberates up through his chest. Francis growls at the Omega cowering in the mirror, hating him. Hating every *inch* of him.

I am an Alpha. I am. I am.

An even deeper growl makes him start. He whips around with a sharp intake of breath, searching for the source of the sound. It reverberates through the house, coming from many places at once, filling his head and the old mansion at the same time.

Francis waits, his heart thumping against his sternum, eyes wide with fear and anticipation.

Slowly, as if drawn by a magnet, his gaze settles on the old glass in the corner of his desk.

Grandmother's dentures. Snaggle toothed and yellowed, the water long since evaporated.

They stare at him. Judge him. Remind him of how much of a failure he is. An ugly Omega. A broken Omega. Too damaged for anyone to want to mate with.

I am an Alpha, Francis thinks, the sound solidifying into a terrifying, primordial snarl. *And I am The Dragon.*

That weekend, the Leeds family dies.

***

Cooking is a feast for both the body and the mind and, as a celebrity inmate, Hannibal is afforded the privilege of preparing the occasional dessert for his most esteemed benefactor.

Nothing requiring knives, of course, or anything else that could, with little effort, be used as a weapon. The little heater used to bring the milk to a simmer is barely more than a tealight and he is heavily supervised as he prepares the dish.

Four guards stand watch, with tranquilizer guns at the ready.

Once the dessert has been poured into hollowed-out oranges, Hannibal arranges the biscuits alongside the cup, dusted them with icing sugar and then adds a sprig of persimmon fruit as a finishing touch.

The guards escort him to his end of the metal table in his cell and shackle his left hand to the table, leaving only his right free with which to eat.

Dr Frederick Chilton sits across from him, raising his dark eyebrows at the plate set before him.

'*Sanguinaccio dolce*,' Hannibal explains, waiting for the guards to leave them alone before he lifts his plastic spoon. 'A classic Neapolitan dessert, with almond milk.' A smile, his eyes twinkling. 'Easy on the stomach.'

What's left of it, anyway.

'*Sanguinaccio dolce*,' Frederick replies, musing over the name of it as he picks up his own spoon. 'You've served me this before.'

'One of my favorite desserts,' Hannibal says, regarding Frederick the same way he did when hosting the other Alpha at his townhouse. 'Traditionally made with pigs' blood, but, in this case, a local cow.'

Frederick pauses, right before dipping the spoon into the pudding.

'And when you *last* served it to me?' he drawls, glancing up at the cannibalistic Alpha preening across the table from him.

Hannibal delights in the rush of salty fear he can so easily induce in Frederick, and tips his head as if sharing a great secret as he replies,

'The blood was from a cow… only in the derogatory sense.'

Frederick sits for a moment, stunned that Hannibal has just so easily admitted to using someone's blood in part of a meal, and then, feeling faintly queasy, gathers up a helping of the rich ganache. Warily, he lifts the spoon to his mouth and places it between his lips. He expects to hate it, expects to cringe and for the nausea to swell into hot sickness, but it's *delicious*. Dark, rich and not too sweet. There's a hint of salt blended with the cocoa. Smooth, thick and dangerous moreish, the flavors explode across his tongue and make his whole mouth water.

'Mmm,' he says, glancing up in surprise.

Hannibal grins, all but purring at the unspoken compliment.

'Blood and chocolate…?' Frederick swallows again, licking his lips. 'That should've been the subtitle of my book.' Hannibal lifts his own spoonful to his mouth, relishing the taste as his would-be biographer continues, 'But, I promised myself I would never use colons in my titles.' A self-deprecating smile. 'Colons lose their novelty when overused.'

No, Hannibal smugly thinks, *they don't.*

'You will have to write another book,' he says, smiling across at the damaged Alpha clinging to the pretense of importance.

‘Hm, I am,’ Frederick says, eating more pudding. ‘But not about *you*.’

The ploy is clumsy and vulgar, made all the more obvious for the way in which Frederick sneers at him. Hannibal glances up, indulging his curiosity for just a moment, and then turns his attention back to the beauty of the *sanguinaccio dolce* before him. Frederick, never one to know when to stop, continues to needle him. ‘Like overused punctuation, the novelty of Hannibal Lecter has waned.’ He feigns a sad, sorrowful tone.’

‘What is the subject of your new book, Frederick?’ Hannibal asks, coolly displeased with the other man, and Frederick licks the spoon, red-ringed eyes trained on him as he purrs, smugly,

‘The Tooth Fairy.’

Hannibal spares him a quick glance, barely quirking his eyebrow at the reference to the appalling tabloid name for the killer of two unrelated American families.

‘I find folks are a bit more interested in him,’ Frederick continues, unable to resist poking him, trying to get a reaction. ‘He *is* the debutante. Although,’ he smiles, gesturing to the artful plate, ‘he lacks your love of presentation.’

‘More of a shy boy, this one,’ Hannibal says, unfazed by the goading.

‘I’d love to hear your thoughts,’ Frederick says, greedy eyes locked on the captive Alpha before him. Anything Hannibal Lecter says, of course, will be taken as his own. Who listens to the word of a convicted serial killer? At Hannibal’s continued silence, he sets the spoon down, foregoing the pretense. ‘What do *you* think about the Tooth Fairy?’

Hannibal, lithe and poised, creates the unnerving impression of a great cat lounging before an antelope. He could pounce at any moment and, chained though he may be, he is still dangerous.

‘I think he doesn’t like being called the Tooth Fairy,’ he says, and Frederick frowns, irritated by the lack of insight offered from the, annoyingly brilliant, psychiatrist.

‘It isn’t as snappy as “Hannibal the Cannibal”,’ he agrees, ‘but he *does* have a much *wider* demographic than you do.’ Another sneer. Another needle. ‘*You*... with your fancy allusions and your fussy aesthetics…’

Hannibal pauses, just for a moment, and then returns to another mouthful of dessert.

Frederick is, what some would call, *roasting* him.

One day, he will be sure to return the favor.

‘You will always have *niche* appeal,’ Frederick continues, picking up his spoon again. It really is a most *wonderful* dessert. ‘But *this* fellow? There is something so universal about what he does. Kills whole families… and in their *homes?’* He raises his eyebrows, the picture of contrived distress. ‘Strikes at the very *core* of the American Dream.’ Unable to get a response to that, he tries one last time. ‘You might say he’s a four-quadrant killer.’

‘Yes,’ Hannibal replies, and watches, amused, as Frederick’s hopes visibly rise, only to be dashed with his non-committal, ‘you might.’

Entertainment is so hard to come by, now that Alana has moved him out of the cell block following the unfortunate incident with Multiple Miggs, and Hannibal does so enjoy his petty torments.

It’s the only reason he still permits Frederick to visit him.

That, and he wishes to borrow his newspaper.

***

Frederick retires to his old office after his lunch with Hannibal. He sits back in the expensive leather chair, his feet up on the desk and ankles crossed, chewing the end of his Mount Blanc fountain pen as he thumbs through the sparse pages of Hannibal’s patient file.

Dr Lecter continues to resist talking therapies with members of clinical staff at the Hospital, Dr Bloom writes, her words written in clear black ink on the crisp white paper. *When presented with the standard tests – Rorschach, Levenson et al – he disengages from vocal conversation and, if asked to complete paper forms, folds them into origami before returning to the surveyor through the feeding tray.*

He hears the door open behind him but doesn’t look up. He already knows who it is and he just smiles.

‘Get out of my chair, Frederick,’ Alana says, sighing at the other Alpha’s insufferable arrogance. She’d hoped his gutting and being shot in the face might have humbled him but he seems as intolerable as ever. More so, thanks to his fame.

‘Shall we join hands in a prayer of gratitude?’ Frederick teases, getting up and dropping the file onto the desk with a pile of others for Alana to review. ‘“Thank you, Father, for allowing us to remove this monster, monster of monsters, from your flock? Thank you, on behalf of the souls we will spare of pain.”’

Alana sits, disliking the warmth clinging to the leather, and begins to tidy up the mess created by the petty, irritating man before her.

‘Thank you,’ she says, sitting back once the documents have been organized and crossing her legs again. ‘On behalf of the monster? Was that the magisterial “we”?’

Chilton shrugs, leaning his hands on the back of one of the chairs facing the new Director of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

‘It is our cabal,’ he replies. ‘Yours and mine.’ At Alana’s silence, he adds, ‘Hannibal Lecter will spend the rest of his life in a state institution, watching the diaper cart go by.’

‘We lied,’ Alana says quietly, and Chilton looks down, shifting uncomfortably until she adds, pointedly, ‘*You* wrote a *book* of lies.’

‘Not difficult to see lies flying above my head,’ Frederick says, fiddling with the stitching running through the leather. ‘*But* it’s almost impossible to shoot them down.’

‘Hannibal will shoot them down,’ Alana warns. ‘He’s written a brilliant piece for “The American Journal of Psychiatry”.’

Frederick scoffs and turns away, pacing to release some of the unconscious tension.

‘Everything he writes is about some problem he does not *have!’* he scoffs, making a beeline for the liquor cabinet and pouring himself a whiskey.

‘Well, what he’s written is *going* to be your problem,’ Alana advises him, sitting forwards and clasping her hands together on the desk. ‘It’s not so much an article as it is a rebuttal.’

Chilton blinks, then composes his self-satisfied self.

‘Hard to believe an inmate’s opinion will count for anything in the professional community,’ he says, more to reassure himself than her.

‘It’s going to *count*, Frederick,’ Alana says, ‘and it’s going to *sting*.’

Frederick rolls his eyes, lowering himself into the chair he’d been fiddling with before his trembling knees betray him.

‘You think he would’ve taken the opportunity to gloat,’ he grumbles, thinking sourly of the Alpha locked away on his own top-security floor in a separate wing of the institute.

Somehow, Hannibal always seems to be doing one better than him.

‘He’ll have plenty of time to gloat,’ Alana says, seeking to soothe her flustered colleague. ‘Watching the diaper carts go by.’ Then, once Frederick seems mollified, she adds, ‘So… what did you two talk about?’

Chilton smirks.

‘I am *always* surprised you don't listen in. When I was in your position, I recorded every word.’

‘That’s illegal,’ Alana reminds him. Then, ‘What did you talk about?’

‘The Tooth Fairy,’ Frederick says. ‘I’ve detected a trace of competitive vanity in our man.’ At Alana’s lowered gaze and the tang of worry coloring her scent, he leans closer. ‘I would be cautious,’ he advises. ‘The Young Turk may inspire the Old Lithuanian to keep himself interesting.’

And we all know what happens when Hannibal is interesting.

***

Francis enjoys Country and Western music the most. Grandmother had preferred choir music, sung by the angelic voices of altar boys, but now that the house is his, Francis can use the turntable to play whatever he likes.

He sits in his armchair, wreathed in darkness. Only his face is lit, illuminated by the flickering glow of the film projector next to him. Light stabs through celluloid frames, clicking rapidly as the reels spin.

The movie is silent. Only the music accompanies the images that he sees.

Francis keeps very still. He is transfixed, he knows, by the power before him. By the tribute to his own Alpha sense.

And then the noise comes again. A low growl, hungry and demanding, from everywhere and nowhere.

Francis looks around, alarmed.

I did what you wanted. I honored you. Please, don't hurt me.

He kicks the table with the record player, knocking the needle off the vinyl. The record cuts off with a rush of static and then a high-pitched whine slices through the resulting silence.

Francis cowers, pressing his palms to his ears. The whine hurts, making his ears ring. Are they bleeding? It feels like they should be bleeding.

From the corner of his eye, he sees something slide out of sight. There, and then gone. He only glimpses it, but it looked like a reptilian tail. The noise comes again from the darkness, low and intimate, now. Francis flinches, his heart hammering.

The growl rises, louder and threatening.

Submit.

Whining softly, his Omegan scent thickening like sweet molasses, Francis sloses his eyes tight, surrendering himself to the beast.

I'm yours, he thinks, opening himself to the power radiating behind him. *Only yours.*

Deep inside his skull, a light begins to grow. It starts as just a flicker, deep beneath the surface, but it quickly swells. It's as powerful as his Heat, blazing out of him.

The celluloid strips wrap around him. They into the skin of his face and yet somehow still move. Still play the film. The images. The tribute.

The flicker of light inside him projects through it. He *is* the tribute. He *is* the instrument of the Dragon.

Through the blood and the screams, red wings unfurl.

Soon.

***

Under the glow of a full moon just waned, Hannibal Lecter stands over the steel desk bolted to the wooden floor. Articles, periodicals, newspapers and fan mail cover the surface. There are articles about Hannibal himself, letters from admirers and copies of his contributions to medical and psychiatric journals.

The article that he focuses on, however, is in *The Buffalo Citizen*, the newspaper that Dr Chilton was so kind as to leave for him after his earlier visit.

Hannibal separates the first page from the newspaper, and, licking along the edge, forms a neat crease, which he then tears as sharply as a knife.

In Mississippi, by the light of an old oil heater, Francis uses a pair of butcher's scissors to cut the same article from his own copy of *The Citizen*. He separates the article from the paper, repeating the process with the other reports of the murders.

This is *his* tribute.

He leaves the clippings and moves to fetch a great ledger from a sturdy table beneath the painting of Blake's *The Great Red Dragon*. It is more than a hundred years old, bound in black leather with brass corners, and Francis strains to carry it.

He settles back into his chair and opens the ledger. Across the first page, from words cut from newspapers and magazine, are the words from Revelation: "And There Came a Great Red Dragon."

Leaning down, he scents the pages as he opens the book. After the title, there is another rendering of the Dragon and, beneath it, a picture cut from an old anatomy book, of an Alpha fetus.

Crammed into the margins around each image are Francis's notes; small, cramped handwriting that he pays no attention to as he sucks up the smell of sweet Omegan pheromones and musky seed.

Nestled in the pages is a faded photograph of his childhood. The only image he has of Grandmother. He sits on the Alpha woman's knee, head bowed to bare the nape of his neck to her. Grandmother stares at the camera, a severe and uncompromising woman, and Francis feels a twist of familiar shame, guilt and self-loathing before he quickly sets the image aside, facedown so as not to distract from this moment.

Behind him, breathing hot against the shell of his ear, the Dragon purrs.

He is pleased.

Francis turns another page. Now there are pictures and news articles detailing Dr Hannibal Lecter's arrests. The Alpha in the images is strong and refined. He is everything Francis wishes he could be.

Everything the Dragon lets him become.

Hannibal Lecter is the Alpha he wants. The Alpha he *needs*, until he can complete the transformation himself.

Hannibal Lecter is a primal Alpha; a killer of lesser beings. He is a true predator, and he is deserving of Francis's worship and the Dragon's respect.

He turns to a fresh page and prepares his own clippings, spreading glue to secure the paper to the ledger. Across from the Tattle Crime tagline of "Hannibal the Cannibal" now sits his own offensive nickname: "Tooth Fairy Massacres Perfect Families."

Grabbing a Sharpie from the pot of pens beside him, Francis scrubs out the words Tooth Fairy.

Only then does the knot of tension begin to uncoil in the pit of his stomach.

They will all understand, soon.

***

In his cell in Baltimore, Hannibal gives himself time to compose his letter before applying graphite pencil to paper. His scent, thick and heavy with affection, seeps into the thin material of the newspaper. It will linger there, he knows, for weeks if needed, to be released upon the opening of the envelope housing his letter.

For a moment, as he sits there, he imagines himself in the Norman Chapel of Palermo. The smell of incense hangs in the air. The sound of whispered prayers and offers to a nameless, uncaring God.

A skull, graven on the floor, reminding them all that Death is their Master.

Smiling, Hannibal sets the tip of the pencil to the paper and begins to write.

Dear Will.

***

Saturdays are for fishing and odd jobs around the house. There's always work to be done, and Will likes to keep busy, especially when the twins aren't around.

Moosehead Lake is always achingly beautiful, but today it seems especially peaceful. Pine-forested hills lie blanketed in snow and steam rises from the river as the sun climbs to its zenith. The dogs play, running and barking, kicking up flurries of white powder in their wake as they chase squirrels and each other, frolicking in the freedom Will gives them.

He's mending the latch on one of the outbuildings when he hears the crunch of approaching tires. Bundled against the cold, his cheeks and nose pink from the chilly wind, he turns at the sound of an unfamiliar engine, his face falling before stilling to an expressionless mask as Jack Crawford steps out of the black FBI-issue SUV.

It was only a matter of time, really, before he came calling.

Will doesn't know how to feel. Disappointed? Nervous? Wary? The words are too weak to do his emotions justice. He drops the screwdriver back into the bag at his feet and approaches the waiting Alpha, wishing he had his glasses to hide the sheen of gold in his otherwise blue eyes.

'Hey, Will,' Jack says, when the Omega is close enough to hear. 'Long time.'

'Jack.' Will removes his lambskin gloves and shoves them in his pocket.

'Got lost twice on the way up here,' Jack says; an offer of appeasement for such a stilted conversation. 'Kept missing the turn.'

'Yeah. It's quiet.' Will sighs, his breath billowing in the frigid air as he looks around. There's no escape. There never was. 'Coffee?'

'Please.'

Will nods.

'I'll be right back,' he says, and strides into the house, leaving his former boss, former mentor, former friend, outside in the cold.

If he takes long enough, will Jack give up and leave?

No such luck. By the time he's poured them each a drink, Jack has moved to the porch, looking out across the lake.

Will sighs, shutting both front and screen door against the chill. He offers one of the steaming cups to the Alpha, noting his thick gray beard, Fedora hat and smart coat.

Definitely not a social call, as if he'd had any doubts.

'Thank you,' Jack murmurs, shivering despite his layers. He sits in one of the chairs Will carved last Fall, looking up with a knowing glint to his dark eyes when Will doesn't settle, but leans against the railing and sips his drink in silence. 'You don't wanna talk inside?' the Alpha ventures, lips twisting in a grimacing smile when Will just looks at him and then sips his drink instead of replying. 'Huh. You don't wanna let *me* inside.' Taking his own sip, he warns, 'I've come too far to let the cold stop me, Will.'

At that, Will snorts and rolls his eyes.

'Why should the *cold* stop what common sense *couldn't?'*

Jack tries again. Alphas are nothing if not persistent.

'So, you don't want to talk about it here.'

‘*I* don’t want to talk about it *anywhere*,’ Will replies. ‘You’ve *got* to talk about it, so let’s have it.’ He scowls, blue eyes flooding with gold. ‘Just er… Just *don’t* get out any pictures,’ he adds, glancing back over his shoulder towards the little lane leading towards the lake. ‘Molly and Walter will be back with the twins, soon.’

Jack narrows his eyes. The twins. *Hannibal Lecter’s* children.

Setting the cup down with a decisive *thunk*, he settles in for the conversation.

‘How much do you know?’ he asks, frowning when Will just shrugs.

‘Two families,’ the Omega says, rattling off the details found in the local newspaper. ‘Killed in their homes a month apart. Similar circumstances.’

‘Not similar, the *same*,’ Jack snaps. He narrows his eyes at the former profiler. The man whose gift could have helped prevent a further four deaths if he hadn’t been so damn *stubborn.* ‘You ever think about giving me a call?’ he asks, a low growl rumbling in his chest when Will scoffs and shakes his head. The look the Omega gives him, though, is sharp with pain, his voice weak as he manages a faint,

‘*No*.’

Jack nods, considering the rebuke.

‘You know what it is?’ he asks, wondering at Will’s insight into his own fear. His own desperate need to build a new life, away from Baltimore and everything that came with it.

Will frowns, bristling at the implication. He turns to face him and shrugs again, rejecting him with the set of his shoulders and the way he clenches his jaw.

‘I didn’t call you because…’ He shakes his head. ‘I didn’t *want* to.’ He looks out towards the garden and pine-strewn hills beyond. This is his home. His sanctuary. He sighs. ‘I don’t think I can be any use to you, Jack. I… I don’t *think* about this, anymore.’ He shakes his head. ‘I don’t believe I could *do* it, now.’

Jack removes one of his leather gloves and uses his dexterous fingers to tug two photographs from the breast pocket of his coat. The two families; an Alpha and Omega in each, smiling happily at the camera, their arms around their kids.

That could have been Hannibal and I with the twins… It’s not so dissimilar to the pictures of Molly with our kids.

‘All dead,’ he murmurs, pressing his advantage when he sees the pain rip through the Omega before him.

Will’s heart sinks and his lungs shrivel inside his chest. His gut twinges and he only just manages to gulp down a whine.

Fuck you, Jack. I told you, no photographs. But you know exactly how to manipulate me.

He takes the pictures. Glances down at them and then looks up again, but he knows the faces of dead children will haunt him.

How would he feel if his own children were in danger? If his own kids had been killed?

‘I think this freak is in phase with the moon,’ Jack says, watching him closely as he provides him with details not available in the national press. ‘Killed the Jacobis almost four weeks ago in Chicago. Full moon. Killed the Leeds family in Buffalo night before last. One day short of a lunar month. With a little bit of luck, we might have a little more than three weeks before he does it again.’

The dogs bark and they both look round. A blond haired woman emerges from the trail leading down to the lake, herding three children before her. An older boy, bundled up and lugging a chain of trout. Two younger children, just shy of seven years. One boy, one girl.

Hannibal and Will’s children.

Will nods down at the photographs, scowling pointedly. Jack whisks them away and pockets them again, standing with a small smile as the woman pauses at the sight of him. He notes the way she gathers the children tighter around her, keeping the dogs between them and the strange Alpha on her porch, and he wonders if Will is going to be the more hospitable of the two.

‘Everything alright?’ Molly Graham asks, blue eyes sliding from the broad Alpha male very obviously upsetting her husband. ‘I didn’t realize we were expecting company.’

‘Special Agent Jack Crawford, FBI,’ Jack says, extending his hand to shake. Molly hesitates for just a moment but then acquiesces, though the exchange is brief. She turns immediately to the watching kids, focusing especially on the solemn-looking boy with brown curls just like Will’s, whose maroon eyes are fixed on the stranger.

‘Wally, take the twins inside and get everyone cleaned off,’ she instructs. ‘Pop the fish in the sink and get everyone changed into dry clothes.’

‘Danny wants hot chocolate,’ the little girl said, despite her twin brother’s continued silence. She pulls her woolly hat off, revealing silky blonde hair and slanted cheekbones, eerily reminiscent of Hannibal.

‘Wally can make some for you, once you’re dry,’ Molly replies, and watches as Gracie takes her younger brother’s hand and leads him inside, followed by their step-brother and the pack of dogs. She turns to Will and he feels a rush of gratitude that she’s backing him up, waiting for him to take the lead.

She’s exactly what he needs.

‘I’m going to chop some wood,’ he says, knocking back the rest of his coffee and leaving the cup beside Jack’s on the table. ‘It’ll be dark soon.’

‘Want some help?’ Molly asks, fixing Jack with another long, hard look when Will nods. ‘We’ll be back soon.’

‘Sure.’ Jack doesn’t take offense at the less-than-warm welcome. They all know why he’s here, after all.

Molly and Will crunch through the snowdrifts near the woodshed, taking up their respective roles at the old, scarred stump. Will wields the axe with deadly accuracy, slicing through logs with enough force to make him sweat, over and over until the knot starts to loosen in his belly.

Molly picks up the pieces, just like always.

‘Jack stopped by to see me at the shop before he came out here,’ she says, when Will’s rage has subsided into troubled contemplation. ‘He asked directions to the house.’

‘He said he got lost,’ Will replies, swinging the axe again.

‘Good,’ Molly replies, grinning when he frowns at her, confused. ‘That was the idea. Y’know, I *tried* to call you. You really ought to answer the phone once in a while.’

Will sets the axe down and wipes his brow with the back of his gloved hands. He frowns, slightly out of breath from the effort of chopping.

‘What else did he ask you?’

‘He asked how you are,’ Molly says, shrugging around her pile of wood. ‘I said you're fine. Said, if you missed your other life, you'd talk about it, but you never do.’ She smiles at him, warm and loving. ‘You're open and calm and easy now, and I love that.’

Will considers that, and her, and then he smiles.

She’s a wonderful woman.

Molly frowns, blue eyes clouding with worry.

‘Are you going to help him?’ she asks, glancing up at the house, at the golden glow of the windows in the gathering dusk. Jack has gone inside, taking shelter in their home with their children.

Will takes half the stack from Molly, sharing the load.

‘Helping Jack is bad for me,’ he says, almost too softly for her to hear as they climb the steps to the back porch, and the kitchen door waiting for them.

Molly doesn’t say anything. What can she say?

It might be bad for him, but it doesn’t mean he won’t do it.

He might not have a choice.

***

Jack takes his time inspecting Will's new house. The lodge is cosy and cluttered, filled with signs of a life well-lived. A family home, simple and comfortable.

Walter Graham sits on the floor with the dogs, playing tug with Buster and a new dog that Jack doesn't recognize. The twins sit opposite each other at the hand-carved dining table; Grace draws, already well-skilled for her age, whilst Daniel reads.

Jack's gaze keeps sliding back to them, apprehension coiling like a snake whenever he notes the similarities to Hannibal. Grace's hair is lighter, yes, but the same fine strands. Daniel's maroon eyes hold the same strange, pinwheel red lights as his Alphan father, and both children share the Lecter brow.

'What're you drawing?' he asks, when Grace looks up at him, soberly holding his gaze until he feels the fine hairs on the back of his neck prickle.

'It's our new dog,' the young girl replies, holding the paper up for him to see when he stands and comes closer. 'His name is Rudy.'

'That's very good,' Jack says, managing a smile. He nods down at Daniel's book. 'And what about you? What are you reading?'

The boy ignores him, turning a page and continuing to read, his lips moving as if sounding the words.

'He's not shy,' Gracie says, lifting her hand and signing at her brother. 'He just can't hear you.'

Daniel glances up, his startled, fawnlike expression reminding Jack of Will, and then offers the Alpha the book.

Jack's stomach lurches – the boy is deaf? He hurries to cover his surprised dismay and nods encouragingly at the title.

'"500 Incredible Facts About Nature."'

'Danny wants to be a vet when he grows up,' Gracie explains, meticulously adding dark brown shading to her dog image. 'Or an astronaut.'

'Yeah?' Jack sits at the head of the table between them, fascinated by Will Graham's children. 'I wanted to be an astronaut too, when I was a kid.'

'What do you do now?' Gracie asks, glancing up with eyes the same blue as Will's.

'Well, I help catch bad people,' Jack explains, foregoing his full title. 'I help stop people getting hurt.'

'Daddy used to help catch bad people,' Gracie says, sitting back to inspect her work. 'Until he had us. Then he moved here to live with Molly and Walter, and got a job fixing boat

motors again.'

'Your Dad is very good at helping us catch bad people,' Jack agreed, dipping lower to encourage Grace's confidence. 'In fact, he's one of the best.'

'Come on,' Walter says, abandoning the dogs to approach from the hearth. 'Time to wash up before dinner.'

'This is for Daddy,' Gracie says, holding out the drawing for Wally to take. 'For when he goes away again. It'll remind him of us.'

Jack stares at the little girl, wondering how she knows he's going to take Will with him when he leaves.

Before he can ask, however, the back door opens and Molly and Will enter, bringing a gust of cold air with them.

'Hey, come on, you two,' Molly scolds, shooing the kids away from the table. 'You should already be in your pajamas!' She fixes Jack with another sharp look, warning him away from her brood, and then soothes it by offering him a brandy.

***

One brandy turns into two, and they empty a bottle of wine with dinner. Will cooks; a salt-crusted trout with garlic-butter potatoes and fresh greens.

By the time the second bottle has started, the twins have been put to bed and Wally's eyelids are starting to droop.

'People dump small dogs here all the time,' Molly says, picking up where they left their conversation before taking the twins up. 'I can give away the cute ones… The rest stay and get to be big ones.'

Will watches her, smiling at his wonderful, sweet, kind wife.

'Molly's a sucker for strays,' he teases, referring to himself and the twins, as well as their six new dogs. The Beta, predictably, laughs at him and shakes her head, blue eyes twinkling as she sips wine.

'You're not fooling anybody, Mr Graham,' she flirts, and Jack can't help but sniff a chuckle at how easy their banter is.

How sweet.

It reminds him of what he'd had with Bella.

'You have a nice life here,' he says, eyes flickering red as he settles again on Will. The Omega flinches, ducking his head and chewing on his lower lip.

‘Yeah,’ he mumbles, gathering his strength before looking up again, meeting Jack’s gaze with open anger and resentment. ‘Yeah, I’m lucky here. I *know* that.’

Walter, sensing the tension between the adults, pushes up from the table.

‘I’m gonna take the dogs out for a pee before bed,’ he announces, and Molly smiles her thanks at him for being so sensitive and mature.

Collecting his coat, Walter clucks his tongue for the dogs to follow and Will’s heart skips a beat, the nape of his neck throbbing; a dull, painful ache.

‘How old is he?’ Jack asks, nodding towards him.

‘Er, eleven,’ Will replies, smiling at Molly again. She’s gone quiet; they’ve danced around the real reason for Jack’s visit since his arrival but it looms, now.

‘He’s gonna be taller than you,’ Jack warns, and Will huffs. He gets up, needing air, needing space, needing to be anywhere but here, with Jack, discussing his adopted son whilst his children – *Hannibal’s* children – are asleep upstairs.

‘Yeah, his father was,’ he says, and grabs for his own jacket. ‘Hold on, I’ll come with you,’ he says, following Wally onto the porch.

When they’re alone again, Molly turns to Jack, dislike etched into every line of her face.

‘So, whatever he says he *wants* to do, you’ll take him anyway, won’t you?’ she asks coldly, and Jack is impressed by the fierce protectiveness she feels for her Omegan partner.

They might not be mated, but she will defend him, nonetheless.

‘I have to,’ Jack says, weary with the responsibility of it. ‘I promise I’ll try to make it as easy on him as I can.’ He nods towards the door where Will escaped. ‘He's changed. It's great you got married, even if you couldn’t Bond.’

Molly looks down, pursing her lips. Her eyes shine; Jack can smell the salt of unshed tears.

‘He's better and better,’ she says, her voice wobbling. ‘With the kids… with me… He doesn't dream so much, now.’

Jack doesn’t say anything. There’s nothing he can say to make it alright.

Molly sniffs and wipes her cheek.

‘He was really obsessed with the dogs for a while,’ she says, swallowing thickly as she remembers the broken Omega she’d met in a trailer park three years ago. ‘Now he just takes care of them. He doesn't talk about them all the time. Doesn't worry about them.’

‘I *know* what I’m asking,’ Jack says quietly, pulling two photographs from inside his sweater and sliding the images across the table to her. ‘I wish to *God* I didn’t have to.’

Molly gives him a crooked smile, doubting every syllable of his intent, but she accepts the photos and studies them for a long time. When she passes them back, her shoulders are slumped with weary resignation, and Jack nods.

He's glad it isn't a fight.

***

That night, alone in their bedroom, Molly decides to raise the issue with Will. He's sat on the edge of their bed, removing his watch and unlacing his boots, and she snuggles up behind him. There's a moment of tension when she touches him, just like always, and then he relaxes when she makes a point of avoiding his neck.

She knows how embarrassed he is about the scar; how sensitive the skin still is, and she's careful not to go near it.

'How bad is it gonna be,' she asks, ignoring her guilt in favor of enjoying the sweet scent of him, 'if you stay here and read about the next one?'

Will glances back at her, shocked to hear the words – *Jack's* words – slither from her lips.

'If you stay,' Molly persists, sweet and innocent, and utterly naïve of what she's asking of him – what she's pushing him towards – 'and there's more killing… Maybe it would sour this place for you?' She manages a shaky little smile, tracing idle patterns on the thick fabric covering his knee. 'High Noon and all that.'

Will's muscles stiffen, and his expression sharpens, eyes glowing gold as his crest throbs; angry and insistent.

He has the sudden, irrational urge to cover himself up; to pull away from her so she can't touch him.

'Do you *want* me to go?' he demands, and Molly swallows, ignoring her immediate, honest answer.

No.

But Jack has legal guardianship over Will; as the only Alpha in his life now that his bond to Hannibal has been severed, he could force him to go, if he had to.

Molly can make it *Will's* choice, if nothing else. She can do that for him.

'I'd have the satisfaction that you did the right thing,' she offers, smiling sadly. Then, allowing some of her grief and fear to show in her face, *hating* the way she's about to manipulate him, she adds, 'He kills *families*. No one knows how he chooses them. What if he chose us?'

Will flinches, knuckles turning white as he tightens his fists.

'Don't say that,' he pleads. 'If I… go… I'll be… different… when I get back.'

I'll be cold, he thinks, unsure how to put it into words. *I'll be cruel. I'll be the same person I was when I killed and mutilated Randall Tier. When I strung Chiyoh's prisoner up like a firefly.*

The same person he was when he fucked Hannibal, even while his skull was dented from the bone saw.

'*I* won't,' Molly promises, kissing his cheek. 'And the kids won't.'

Will sighs. He doesn't know what to say. There isn't really anything he *can* say.

He kisses her, instead. Molly parts her lips for him, welcoming him to her when he turns. She lies back on the mattress, hugging him close as he settles between her thighs. She strokes her hands through his curls, pushing the heavy hair back from his face to tenderly stroke across the silvered scar on his forehead.

Will tilts his face away from the touch, kissing her fingertips, instead, and Molly smiles. Her breath hitches when Will sucks one of the digits into his mouth, tonguing up the underside, and he locks eyes with her when he releases it.

'Sweet man,' Molly sighs, her skin warming under his touch, arousal fluttering through her to pulse in her groin. 'My sweet man.'

'I love you,' Will whispers, bowing over her again and kissing her with a hunger he hasn't felt in a long time. A desperate need to be with her; to touch and be touched.

Molly reaches between them and unzips her jeans, pushing them down until Will takes the hint and sits back on his heels to divest her of the thick material. He drops the jeans to the side and dips his head to the plain cotton panties his wife favors, gathering up the rich, musky scent of her and humming when it settles on his tongue.

Molly huffs a breathless laugh – she'll never quite get used to how much Omegas scent their lovers – and encourages Will to crawl back up her body.

'Can we get under the covers?' she asks, her flesh already pebbling in the cold air. 'It's freezing.'

'I'll warm you up,' Will says, grinning wickedly before devouring her mouth again. Nonetheless, he leaves her red sweater on and cocoons them in the duvet, keeping as much fabric bunched around them as possible even as his warm hands slip up and round to unclasp Molly's bra.

'Do you remember the first time we had sex?' he asks, pushing the wired cups aside to squeeze and roll Molly's breast, skimming his palm back and forth over her nipple until it hardens into a tight little nub. 'I was so nervous but you knew exactly how to make me feel good.'

'You were pretty skilled yourself,' Molly reminds him, enjoying the rippling pleasure radiating down from her chest. 'And an *avid* learner.'

‘Our honeymoon to The Grand Canyon,’ Will continues, hand moving lower, firm enough not to tickle, skating over the smattering of freckles on Molly’s hip before slipping under the elastic of her panties. ‘Camping under the stars…’

‘The squeaky bed at my parents’ house,’ Molly counters, voice hitching when Will touches her, two fingers gathering up silky wetness before pressing at her entrance and slipping inside, sucked deep and held tight where she so *loves* having him. ‘Feeling like a teenager all over again because we were trying so hard to be quiet and ended up – *ah* – giggling the whole time.’

‘Not giggling now,’ Will says, and they kiss, over and over, the air growing hot and damp between them as they begin to move, hips rocking as Will thrusts his fingers inside Molly’s body, crooking the knuckles to drag against the bundle of nerves and build delicious tension in her muscles. ‘You’re so beautiful, Molly.’

‘So are you,’ Molly replies, her cheeks flushed pink, lips swollen and eyes bright. ‘In… *in*, Will. In… I want to feel you.’

Will slips his fingers free and fumbles to unbuckle his jeans, shoving his boxers down with them until he can release his erection. He pulls Molly’s knickers off and then steadies himself, moaning softly at the feel of heat against the tip. Molly tilts her hips, welcoming him home, and, in one, smooth thrust, they join together.

‘Come here,’ Molly purrs, wrapping her arms and legs tight around him, cradling Will’s face to her chest and establishing a slow, tender rhythm. ‘My wonderful, amazing husband.’

‘Molly…’ Will rocks into her, again and again, nuzzling her cheeks and under her jaw, gathering up the light, sweet scent of her as they move. He rests his lips against her speeding pulse and then suckles a mark into the creamy skin, basking in the gentle affection and warm pride he feels from his Beta partner.

He’s a good man when he’s with Molly. He’s a good father, a good husband, a good provider. He doesn’t need the darkness that Hannibal so carefully cultivated in him. He doesn’t need the monsters and the demons and the violence.

He doesn’t need the thrill of the hunt to feel complete.

He thrusts again, clenching his teeth against a low whine. His heart beats inside a hollow chest, an empty cavern that he’s ignored for so long he’s almost forgotten it’s there.

Almost.

‘Will…?’ Molly shivers when Will pulls out. He hasn’t finished, neither of them have, but this happens sometimes, when he’s particularly upset or distracted.

Will doesn’t speak. He just lowers his mouth to her and nuzzles deep into the thatch of caramel-colored hair. His tongue rasps along her throbbing flesh and Molly moans, surprised by how *hot* he feels. He isn’t due a Heat – he’s religious in taking his suppressants – so this must just be a response to his distress.

‘It’s okay, baby,’ she whispers, looking down and stroking his hair as he licks and sucks her towards orgasm. ‘It’s okay, sweet man. I’ve got you.’

Will slides his fingers back inside her, drawing her closer and closer to the edge. Molly tightens around him, clenching and relaxing in a punishing rhythm, and Will drives her on, needing her to feel good.

One of them should feel good, at least.

‘Oh, there, *there*,’ Molly breathes, eyes fluttering closed and head dropping back as a wave of white pleasure breaks over her, tear-inducing and wonderful as Will continues to stroke her through a shuddering climax.

It feels as if it goes on forever, until she’s over-sensitive and boneless, and laughs when she manages to push him away.

Will kicks his jeans the rest of the way off and removes his sweater, leaving the gray t-shirt on underneath.

He’s never slept naked beside her, not even after sex.

‘Damn,’ Molly says, rolling onto her side and smiling up at him, determined to put him back at ease. ‘*That* was amazing.’

Will smiles and licks his lips, appreciating the taste of her on his skin. He goes to the dresser and fetches himself a fresh pair of pajama trousers, his gaze lingering on Molly, flushed and sweaty and beautiful, in the tangled covers of their bed.

‘I’ll be right back,’ he says, and moves into the adjacent bathroom to brush his teeth. ‘Don’t go anywhere.’

‘Never,’ Molly promises, and they both know it’s more than just the bed. More than just him leaving her to freshen up.

It’s a plea for her to stay with him, no matter what happens in Buffalo and Chicago.

No matter how much he changes.

***

Tiny clicks of blinking eyes. The rasp of steady breathing, in and out of lungs. The dissonant thuds of two heartbeats, their rhythms mismatched and unbalanced.

Will can’t sleep.

He’s uncomfortable. Itching in random places. Aching, thirsty and *hot*. Too hot. Sweating, his t-shirt sticking to his back and making his boxers cling.

He’s not due a Heat. He’s not, it’s just been a long time since his insomnia was this bad.

Not since the trial…

He can't stop thinking. He can't stop thinking about the Leeds and the Jacobis.

Dead children. Dead Omegas. Dead Alphas. Dead families wiped out of existence by one crazy man.

My foundations are shifting sands and I have no paddle.

Pushing the covers back, he very quietly pads to the dresser against the far wall and slides open the middle drawer. At the back, tucked away and hidden beneath thick winter socks and spare sweaters is an envelope.

Will tugs it free, holding it carefully between his hands.

Should he?

Can he?

Half an hour later, he's sat on the couch in front of a crackling fire in the living room. The dogs mill around him, breathing and snuffling, enjoying the warmth, and Will is bundled up in a cable-knit sweater with a high neck; an unconscious attempt to shield his neck from unwanted eyes.

The outer envelope is plain brown, wax-sealed and stamped with the FBI Headquarters return address.

The envelope inside, however, is thick and heavy, good quality paper and bearing his name in achingly familiar copperplate handwriting.

Mr Will Graham.

He's had the letter for weeks. The moment he received it, opened it, and saw the font, he'd put it away. He hadn't told Molly about it. Hadn't told anyone… He'd just… Put it away. The same way he'd put everything from his old life "away".

He probably should have burned it.

Taking a deep breath, Will slides his thumb under the lip of the envelope and tugs. The seal breaks and releases a waft of Hannibal's scent – thick, rich, *succulent* – into the air. The moment Will smells it, tastes it, the musk settling onto his tongue like sugar, his throat aches and the crest scar on the back of his neck sears with pain.

Apprehension battles wariness. Will pulls the letter from the envelope and, as he does, a neatly folded newspaper article slips to the floor.

It's the old headline of *The Buffalo Citizen*. "Tooth Fairy Massacres Perfect Families."

Swallowing thickly, his scent glands swelling under his jaw, Will ignores the newspaper article in favor of unfolding the letter.

'Dear Will,' he reads, Hannibal's writing as elegant in pencil as it is in ink. Will can *hear* him, speaking the words, his voice a low, smooth purr as he pours poison into Will's ear. *'We have all found a new life, but our old lives hover in the shadows. Soon enough, I fear Jack Crawford will come knocking. I would encourage, as a friend, as your former mate, not to step back through the door he holds open. It's dark on the other side, and madness is waiting.'*

The words are a chill echo of Will's own fevered thoughts, when he was trapped in his own shattered psyche, unable to fight his way back to the surface of tortured dreams.

The teacup shatters and, for just a moment, he can't remember who he is. He can't remember anything… He can't… He *can't* –

He bends to pick up the clipping, considering it for a moment. Then, with a low, furious growl, he tosses both letter and newspaper article into the fire.

'It's two thirty-six am,' he whispers, lifting golden eyes to the clock on the mantlepiece, barely able to see for how much he's shaking. 'I'm at Moosehead Lake, Maine. My name is Will Graham.'

A simple reminder, Hannibal had said, once, even as he set his mind on fire and tried to mold him from the ashes that remained. *A handle to reality for you to hold onto… and know you are alive.*

***

'I'll call you when I land,' Will says, hugging Molly tight the next morning. It's early, and still dark, but Walter and the twins are up to say goodbye, coats, hats and gloves on over their thermal pajamas. 'I'll be home as soon as I can.'

'We know you will,' Molly replies, kissing his flushed cheek before releasing him.

Will crouches before Gracie and Daniel.

'Be good for Molly,' he says, signing for Danny and then pulling them into an equally close embrace. 'Take care of each other. I love you, *so* much.'

'Are you going to catch the bad man, Daddy?' Gracie asks, gazing up with such sincerity that Will can't speak for the lump in his throat. He swallows, trying to dislodge it, but can only nod mutely and hug her again when she hands him a piece of folded paper. 'I drew a picture for you, so you won't miss us.'

'I'll miss you anyway, baby girl,' Will whispers, tears pricking his eyes as he places adoring kisses on each child's forehead. 'And you, my gorgeous boy. I'll miss you so much.'

'You'll come back,' Gracie says, more confident that Will felt. 'You always do.'

'I *promise*.' Will takes the paper from his daughter and slips it, securely, in the breast pocket of his coat, over his heart. Then, rising to stand, he offers his hand to Wally for either a shake or a hug. 'Take care of your Mom for me, won't you?'

Wally hugs him and Will purrs, just once, nuzzling his soft brown hair and scenting him before they step apart.

‘So, er, all the ingredients for the dogs’ food is in the pantry,’ Will says, eyes on Molly again, even as Jack rolls down the window to chivvy him along. ‘Be careful with Buster and Lulu – they seem to be fighting over their share more than usual… And Winston is due his vaccination at the vet next month.’

‘Will, it’s going to be *fine*,’ Molly says, stepping close and cupping each side of his face. She stares into his golden eyes, hating the way fear makes them shine, and places a final kiss on his lips. ‘You’re going to be *fine*. Just promise me you’ll come home as soon as you can.’

‘I will,’ Will says hoarsely, biting his tongue to silence the pitiful whine fighting to free itself from his throat and comforting himself with a last look at the twins. At his children; his precious boy and girl. ‘I’ll come home. I promise.’

***

Buffalo lies under a blanket of stars, the inky sky broken by a silver crescent of light. There’s one week to go until the next full moon and Will’s tension mounts as he climbs the steps to the Leeds’s front porch.

He’s parked two blocks away, walking through the cold night with the police report tucked under his arm.

The house, set back from the street, is shrouded in darkness. Bare windows. Sealed doors. A dog kennel sits, empty, in the corner of the deck, a blanket and water bowl evidence of its former occupant. Will frowns, making a note to ask Jack about the dog. Must be the Spaniel from the photograph, but where is she?

A car drives past. It doesn’t slow. Doesn’t stop. Probably a neighbor; a murder house is ugly to neighbors. Only outsiders and children stare.

Will tries to be still. He holds his breath when the beam of his flashlight falls on the circle of cut glass in the front door; expertly made by an industrial glass-cutter.

Not fond of locks.

He’s been given a spare key, and uses it now to cut the crime scene tape before unlocking the door. It moves on silent hinges and he steps across the threshold, taking a slow, deep breath.

He feels pain. Rage… *Hatred*. Tastes the metallic tang of old blood, sweet with the first hint of rot and smells a myriad of scents. The Leeds family permeates the air most thoroughly, crisscrossing each other again and again; testament to a life lived together. But, slicing through all of that, Will smells a burnt, bitter stench. Something… *wrong*. Corrupt.

The killer.

He wants to turn on the lights. Wants to put on his shiny FBI Special Investigator badge and make some official noises to justify himself to the silent house where four people have died.

He doesn't. He just follows the corrupted scent deeper into the kitchen, past the bowl of oranges on the counter. Past the kitchen range, lit by two blue pilot-lights.

The scent goes directly to the refrigerator and Will opens the door, bottles clinking faintly as pale light washes over him. He sees evidence of family life; juice, milk and healthy snacks. Pots of chocolate pudding and sliced luncheon meat for sandwiches.

There's a small wheel of cheese on the top shelf. Half-unwrapped, missing a chunk. A decisive bite has been taken, leaving dents in the soft cheddar.

The thermostat clicks and Will jumps, his heart racing. He closes the door, working hard to control the fear sharpening his senses to the point of pain, and moves on.

He follows the scent through the living room and towards the stairs. Yellow markers indicate droplets and smears of blood, dried to a crust now on the floorboards. A soleprint and toes… The killer walked, barefoot, through the house, covered in the blood of his victims.

Why?

Will is careful to avoid the evidence as he ascends to the next floor. Dread is a heavy lump of ice in his gut and he's barely breathing, knowing that what he feels now is only going to get worse when he sees the rooms where the Leeds family died.

The first room is the twin boys' bedroom. Will's flashlight casts a brutal glare over the rumpled bedding, following the red splashes until it highlights the places where the children were killed. The light reveals the dead youngsters, like a wormhole through time to show how they were found and photographed by the police.

Will knows he'll never get those images out of his mind. They'll haunt him until the day he dies.

They were only a year older than Daniel and Gracie.

He retreats from the room, the back of his nest prickling, and swings his light across the hallway.

Charles Leeds comes into focus; an image scarred on Will's retinas from careful examination of the file earlier today. The Alpha had fallen against the wall, clearly on his way to the boys' bedroom, and bled out.

The upstairs hallway mirror has been smashed. Its shards shine brilliantly as Will plays the flashlight over them. Cracks. Splinters. Chunks gone, leaving the bare wood of the frame behind.

Missing pieces of a whole.

He knows how that feels.

The door at the end of the hall stands open. The outer edge of the flashlight beam throws more bloodstains and drag marks into sharp relief.

Will doesn't want to look. He really, *really* doesn't want to look.

But he has to.

He steps across the threshold of the master bedroom. His eyes have adjusted but the terror gripping him keeps him from seeing clearly. He sees the shapes of furniture. Strings of red wool where the forensic analysts have tried to reconstruct the source of each bloodstain. Ominous dark designs on the walls.

Will pauses, his gloved finger hovering over the light switch. It is smeared with Mr Leeds' blood and hair.

Still, he begs his beating heart. His buzzing mind. *Be still… Be still.*

He takes a breath, drowning in the hot, thick scent of the killer, and flicks the switch.

The air screams. There's blood everywhere. So much blood. It's splashed on the walls, up the headboard, across the ceiling… The bed is a mess of it, the mattress so sodden it still gleams wetly.

It's nothing like the elegant death tableaus Hannibal gave him. Nothing like Angel Maker or even the goddamn *totem of corpses*.

It's worse than the Hobbs' kitchen. Jagged and jarring. A new level of insanity.

Will can feel himself shaking. He struggles to gather his composure – he can feel his mind splintering, fear lapping at the edges of his resolve, wearing him down like waves against sandstone – but he manages to open the case file.

He can do this.

He *has* to do this.

He can see and hear better when he's afraid. He *understands* better when he's afraid.

And he is so very, *very* afraid.

The words dance and jump before his eyes. Snatches of information – the light on the vent-hood over the stove and the porch light had been on when the police arrived. The number and variety of bloodstains was inconsistent with the locations of the victims. Mr Leeds had a superficial ligature mark around his chest, believed to be post-mortem.

Will's rapid, panicked pants slow of their own accord. He feels the dark current welling inside him, bubbling up with eager anticipation, and his eyes slip shut.

The pendulum swings and madness follows.

Now.

Time reverses. The bloodstains are gone. The mirror is whole. Will is the killer, standing outside the porch door with a glass-cutter in his gloved hands.

Now.

He presses the suction cup to the pane and turns the dial on the cutter, over and over and over until the glass pops out. It's a simple matter, then, of curving his hand in to flip the latch and open the door.

He is inside.

He goes straight to the stairs – they don't make a sound as he climbs. He is filled with dark, sure purpose.

The master bedroom door is open. He enters without turning on the light and uses a switchblade to cut Mr Leeds' throat as he lies asleep beside his mate. As the Alpha struggles, his barely-waking brain unable to understand that he is dying, Will moves to turn on the overhead light. It startles Mrs. Leeds awake and Will shoots her as she rises. The bullet enters to the right of her navel and lodges in her lumbar spine, silencing her scream.

Mr Leeds rises, his throat cut, and pushes carelessly past Will. He is determined to get to his children. To protect them, as he could not protect his Omega.

Will sneers at him. *Pathetic*.

He shoves him to the floor, causing another splash of red to hit the nightstand. Stares down at Mrs. Leeds, who whimpers and mewls panicked pleas for mercy, bleeding into the covers of her nest.

Now for the children.

He shoots one of the two boys in bed. The other has woken, and seeks refuge under the bed. He sobs when Will drags him out by his ankles, but he is not the target, and he dies quickly with a bullet to the brain.

Mr Leeds, drawing upon the last of his Alphan strength, staggers out into the hallway. He is losing gallons of blood, suffocating as it fills his lungs, and falls to die outside his sons' room.

You couldn't save anyone, could you?

Leaving the dead for the moment, Will begins to smash the mirrors. He collects pieces as he goes, but he smashes them all. Every surface cracks, distorting his reflection.

He strangles Mrs. Leeds, crouching atop her as he chokes the last of the life from her. He places shards of mirror inside her eyelids. In her mouth. Between her labia. He does the same to Charles and his sons – their eyes and mouths glint with mirrored glass – and he lines them up against the wall so they can watch as he mounts her, bites her, claims her. As he uses his teeth to rip the ruined crest from the back of her neck before fucking her, again and again, in every orifice.

It is a Rutting frenzy. An Alpha mad with the need to mate.

Will's body sears with heat at the knowledge of it, even as his stomach swirls with nausea.

When he's done, he puts the family back where he killed them. All but Mrs. Leeds. She remains the focal point of his masterpiece. She remains the true purpose of his attack.

I wanted you to watch what I did to her. I wanted you to see.

Hobbs' sibilant whisper feels too close. Rotten breath brushes his ear and Will flinches. He comes back to himself, shuddering and sobbing, drenched in cold sweat and keening like a wounded animal.

God… He can't keep *doing* this.

He dry-heaves in the Leeds' family bathroom toilet. Rinses the bitter taste of bile from his mouth at the sink and tries not to look at the smashed mirror.

The medicine cabinet is neat and orderly. Emergency Neutralizer shots. Razors and shaving cream. Painkillers. There are pantyhose drying on the towel racks. Molly dries hers in just the same way and the homeliness of it pierces him.

Will heaves again but there's nothing to throw up.

He hasn't eaten since yesterday.

When he's back in the master bedroom, a thought occurs to him with such speed and clarity that he has to say it aloud.

'Talcum powder on the body. There's none in the house.'

He checks the report again, flicking through the inventory, but no. Nothing.

He stares down at his own gloves – black now, instead of standard-issue white – and, with sickening realization, draws off the blood-slicked latex. Talc drifts down from inside, dusting across Mrs. Leeds's chewed, scratched breasts.

'I have to touch her,' Will whispers, and he sees the Omega's eyes, mouth and crotch chakras begin to glow, pulsing with a warm, welcoming light.

He feels… pleased. Honored by the tribute. Proud to have made it… Grateful that it is well received.

As Will reaches out to touch the golden Omega, clothed in sunlight, red strings fan into the air behind him, creating his wings.

'*This*,' he purrs, splaying his bare hand over the place where Mrs. Leeds's heartbeat slowly fades, 'is *my* design.'

***

It's only when he gets back to the hotel that Will realizes how *much* he's sweated. It's soaked through his t-shirt, his shirt *and* his sweater, and his boxers are damp with it. If he'd been wearing light-colored jeans, they'd show it.

There's a conference being held in the hotel's convention hall and Will can hear snatches of voices when the doors open. Two Alphas stumble out into the lobby, bleary-eyed and using each other to stay upright, and Will is dimly aware that his scent-blockers must have worn off, because he catches them staring hungrily as he checks himself in.

'Goddamn,' one of them mutters, not as quiet as he thinks he is, 'I'd love to tear off a piece of *that*.'

'Fuck him till his nose bleeds,' the other one growls, and Will has to clench his teeth to keep from snarling at them. He's tired and they're riled up; it wouldn't end well.

The receptionist, a pretty Beta woman, gives him a sympathetic look and points to the room number written on his keycard, instead of saying it aloud.

'Thank you,' Will says, sharing a nod of understanding.

She's been harassed too many times in her short life already not to help another vulnerable person.

Will moves to the elevator and presses the button for the third floor. He's actually on five, but he doesn't want the Alphas to know that.

Thankfully, they stagger towards the bathroom, instead, sniggering like horny teenagers and knocking into an armchair.

Will breathes a sigh of relief when the elevator doors ping shut and he's safely away from them.

His head is pounding, neck and shoulder muscles like stone from the tension he's been carrying ever since Jack arrived in Maine. When he gets to the hotel room, he pours himself two fingers of whiskey – having purchased a bottle and some Aspirin from an all-night pharmacy – and drinks it before calling Jack.

Even at two-thirty a.m., the Alpha sounds sharp and focused.

'Crawford.'

'It's me,' Will says, pinching the bridge of his nose. 'You need to call Price and Zeller. There's a cheese wheel in the refrigerator, it looks like the killer bit it. Got a good set of teeth marks.'

'And Price?' Jack asks, both of them knowing what the Betas specialize in. 'Buffalo PD already dusted for prints. Everything was smooth or smudged; the lab swore he wore gloves the whole time.'

‘No, no, he had to touch her,’ Will insists. ‘With his bare hands. He had to… he *had* to, Jack…’

‘Okay, okay,’ Jack says, soothing him. ‘I’ll get them both down here first thing.’ He huffs. ‘They’ll have to hurry; the funeral’s this afternoon.’ There’s a pause, and then the Alpha speaks more softly. ‘You sound exhausted, Will. Try to get some sleep, okay? The briefing’s at 8.’

‘Yeah.’ Will doesn’t promise anything. He knows better than that. He hangs up and then stares at his cell phone.

He wants to call home. He wants to speak to Molly, and video call Walter and the twins. He wants to curl up with his family and be quiet and still and safe.

But he can’t. It’s the middle of the night there, as well as here, and he won’t disturb them.

Instead, Will fumbles to pull Gracie’s drawing from his coat pocket. The paper holds their lingering scents, just as Hannibal’s letter had, and he brings it to his nose to scent them deeply.

Curling onto his side, Will wraps the comforter up and over his head, snuggling down into his makeshift nest and resolutely closing his eyes as he tries to will himself to sleep, surrounded by the smell of family.

Maybe, just maybe, he’ll get an hour or two before the nightmares hit.

***

Special Agent Jimmy Price *hates* flying. He also hates having to rush to places because other forensic specialists can’t do their damn *jobs*.

But, what he hates even more than all that, is having his credentials *questioned*, especially at six o’clock in the morning.

‘I was told you were told I was coming,’ he says testily, preparing his equipment so he can begin whenever the uptight Mr Lombard *deigns* to give him the all-clear. ‘Were you not told?’

‘Your office or agency called me, of course,’ the Funeral Director replies, still scrutinizing Price’s FBI ID, his eyes heavily tinged red. ‘But last night we had to get the police to remove an obnoxious flame-haired woman trying to take pictures. I'm being very careful; I'm sure you understand, Mr. Price.’

‘Agent,’ Jimmy corrects, leaning across the slab holding Mrs. Leeds’ bagged body. ‘Special.’

He also hates Alphas who assume that a Beta can’t hold a position of authority. Mr Lombard reeks of such prejudice, and it rankles Jimmy to no end.

‘Special Agent Price,’ Mr Lombard says, sounding annoyed at the chastisement. ‘The bodies were only released to us at one o’clock this morning and the funeral’s at five this afternoon.

We simply *can't* delay it.'

'This won't take very long,' Jimmy assures him. 'I'll need one reasonably-intelligent assistant, if you have one.'

Before Mr Lombard can reply or object again, there's a crash as Brian Zeller stumbles into the room, pushing three precariously balanced equipment cases and carrying a heavy camera bag and tripod.

'Cancel the reasonably-intelligent assistant,' Price says, grinning at his flushed, breathless colleague. 'Mine just showed up.'

'I can't help you with your thing. I've got a thing,' Brian replies, waving him away and hefting the heavy satchel from his aching shoulder.

'What thing do *you* got?' Jimmy asks, offended at the implication of it being more important than *his* thing.

Mr Lombard watches the whole exchange like a tennis match, amazed by the verbal sparring between the two Betas.

'I'm reconstructing teeth from bite marks on Mrs. Leeds and this mini cheddar cheese wheel from her refrigerator,' Brian says, holding up a little evidence baggy with the snack inside. 'Tooth Fairy was feeling peckish.'

'Well, we'll double-Dutch,' Jimmy says briskly, snapping on blue gloves as Mr Lombard moves to unzip the body-bag holding Mrs. Leeds. 'Woman's gotta get in the ground.'

The Alphan Funeral Director turns pasty white when he sees the mauled, mutilated Omega, and he quickly excuses himself once Zeller starts snapping photographs of the bite-marks, and the ragged mess of flesh where her Bonding Crest used to be.

The two Betas, undisturbed by the state of the body, work quickly and efficiently, cataloguing the wounds first and then dusting the corneas for prints. Price holds his breath, his hands steady as a surgeon's as he presses a tiny strip of plastic over the powder now coating Mrs. Leeds' dull, dead eyes.

'Voila,' he says quietly, holding the print up to the light. 'Jack was right. He took his gloves off.'

Zeller growled and shook his head.

'Son of a bitch.'

***

'He had to touch her,' Will says to Jack in greeting.

It's 7.50am and they're in the lobby outside the main briefing room of the Buffalo Police Headquarters. Jack hands Will a coffee from the machine, watching him carefully as Will

uncaps the paper cup to blow on the drink to cool it before taking a sip. Behind the tinted lenses of his glasses, the Omega's eyes are dull with fatigue and ringed with shadows.

'I've got Zeller and Price there as we speak,' he promises. 'Did you get any sleep?'

Will shrugs and sips more coffee.

'An hour, maybe two.' Will flinches when the briefing room door opens. He feels raw; like the outer layer of his skin has been peeled off. The glare of the lights is too harsh. The smell of antiseptic and ink and gunpowder and *Alphas* is overwhelming.

'They're ready,' someone murmurs, and then Jack is leading him into the briefing room and they're taking seats on the back row.

'– so house-to-house interviews will continue for a radius of four additional blocks around the scene,' Chief of Police Springfield is saying, his attention on the officers and Detectives before him. 'Airport and hotel details will make the rounds again today. Yes, *again*. Catch every maid and attendant, as well as the desk people. He had to clean up somewhere, and he may have left a mess. If you *find* somebody who cleaned up a mess, you roust whoever's in the room, seal it and get on the horn to Forensics double-quick.'

'What about the teeth cast the FBI are working on?' It's the Public Relations Officer who speaks, preparing notes for Police Commissioner Lewis to use at his nine o'clock press conference. 'The press is going to ask why it'll take days to get a dental representation. Would it be fair to say that the delays are being caused by the FBI, and not us?'

Springfield glances towards Jack, who visibly bristles at the accusation. He nods, almost imperceptibly, and Jack strides up to the front of the room.

'The last thing anyone needs is a pissing contest between the FBI and Buffalo PD,' he says, voice booming out across the hall. 'We're all after the same thing, folks. I don't give a damn who gets the collar; if the person who did this gets hit by a garbage truck tomorrow that would suit be just fine, as long as it gets him off the streets. I'm sure you all feel the same way.'

The sea of faces don't change much, but there isn't quite the air of open hostility as before.

Jack sighs, and then adds,

'We'll share whatever leads we have with you.'

And hope that you do the same for us.

Chief of Police Springfield looks over at Will.

'That your Special Investigator?' he asks, eyes narrowing in consideration when Jack nods. 'Why don't you come on up, son? Maybe you can share some of your thoughts.'

No… No, please, no…

Will feels himself visibly shrink, recoiling from the attention like a shadow fleeing the light, but Jack's expression is closed and there's no way of escaping.

As he makes his way past the rows of Alpha and Beta law enforcement, he feels their eyes burn into the back of his head. He hears their whispers about his caste – *Omega, no, surely not* – turn into murmured questions about why he looks so familiar.

'Wasn't he Bonded to Hannibal Lecter?'

'Frankenstein's Bride, that one.'

'Jesus, how can he show his *face?'*

'Think he's still single?'

Trying hard not to throw up, Will settles his gaze over the heads of the assembled crowd, fixing on a point between the door and the suspended ceiling.

'Mrs. Leeds and Ezra Jacobi were the primary targets,' he says, his voice flat with the effort of fending off the press of emotions coming from the people amassed before him. 'The others,' he shrugs, 'were killed just to complete his fantasy.'

'I find that hard to accept,' one Detective mutters, loudly enough to interrupt, and Will shifts his blank stare towards him, acknowledging the accusation.

'This wasn't *random,*' he replies, blandly. 'This wasn't some killing frenzy. He was *never* out of control. The attacks were highly organized, the Omegas carefully chosen.' Slipping his hand into his jacket pocket, Will clutches his fist tight around Gracie's drawing, drawing strength from it. 'We don't know *how* he's choosing them, or why; they lived in different States and they never met, but there'll be *some* connection. There'll be *some* common factor, and *that's* how you'll catch him.'

'Thank you, Mr Graham,' Springfield says, and Jack gives Will's elbow a reassuring squeeze before they both head back to their seats. Turning to address his staff again, the Chief of Police adds, 'One other thing. I've heard officers in this command unit referring to the killer as The Tooth Fairy.' There was an uncomfortable shifting in chairs, like the rustling of a breeze, and Springfield scowled. 'Now, I don't care *what* you call him among yourselves. I realize you have to call him something, but I had better not hear *any* member of this department refer to him as The Tooth Fairy in public. It sounds flippant. Neither will you use that name on *any* internal memoranda.' A beat. Letting the warning sink in. 'That's all.'

The officers and detectives filed from the room, collecting their assignments from the desk on their way out. Will kept his head down and eyes averted, especially when the Alphas moved close to him, and he didn't remove his glasses until he and Jack were outside in the chill air of the parking lot again.

'That was good, Will,' Jack says, buttoning up his coat as they waited for their cab to arrive.

‘That was… broad strokes,’ Will argues, shaking his head. ‘He’s still got no face to me, Jack.’

Jack hums, considering his assessment. He doesn’t say anything, though, until they’re in the back of the car headed for the airport. Then,

‘You did good work today, Will. I want you to know that.’

Will stares out of the window, hunched down in the leather-polish-scented seat and absently watching the city pass them by. He doesn’t reply.

‘Are you going to call Molly?’ Jack nudges, glancing up from the crime report in time to see the other man flinch.

‘I’ll call her from the hotel later,’ Will mumbles, absently reaching up to fiddle with the collar pressing against the back of his neck. He rolls his shoulders, hot and irritated, and rolls the window down a fraction to let cool air into the vehicle. ‘Did you say my bags have been picked up?’

‘They’re already waiting in your new hotel room,’ Jack assures him. ‘You can get settled in after we’re briefed by Jimmy.’

Will doesn’t say anything. He sinks into nervous silence, chewing on his lower lip and trying not to see the dead Leeds family whenever he closes his eyes.

Tries not to remember the condescending smile on Ted Numan’s face when the Director of Human Resources fired him for being an Omega.

Jack works the whole time they’re travelling. He makes phone calls, following up on leads and chasing results, and Will lets his mind drift. He doesn’t bother trying to read the book he’d brought with him for the flight; instead, he turns his attention inwards, taking a seat on one of the wooden pews in the Norman Chapel of Palermo.

The scent of incense fills the air. Dust motes hang in the shafts of sunlight spilling through the high windows, and Will smiles for the first time since leaving home when he hears the faint, straining notes of Bach.

The sound is distant; it comes from another part of his Memory Palace, carried on the breeze whispering through open doors. He could follow the sound, track it to its source, but Will finds himself reluctant to tread beyond the foyer.

It’s dark on the other side. And madness is waiting.

He contents himself with gazing up at the frescoed ceiling, basking in a warm glow of affection, and when Jack rouses him at Dulles International Airport, Virginia, he feels more refreshed than he has in days.

Maybe this won’t be as bad as he’d feared.

***

‘It’s a partial,’ Price says, showing Jack the blown-up image of Mrs. Leeds’ left eye, and the print he’d managed to lift from the cornea. ‘Probably a thumb.’

‘Jimmy, you’re the light of my life,’ Jack says, and Jimmy nods, preening at the praise.

‘I know. The print was smudged,’ he continues, stealing repeated glances at Will. ‘Never would've seen it, but it stood out against an eight-ball hemorrhage… I just…You… er…’ He blinks at the Omega. ‘I’m sorry, I’m just surprised to see you *back...?* He trails off hopefully, but Will doesn’t say anything, just lowers his eyes and stares, hard, at the floor instead of the images of dead bodies.

Brian leans round from where he’s standing behind him and smiles.

‘*Welcome* back,’ he says, and Will manages a small, tight smile.

‘It's good to see you,’ Jimmy adds, and Will nods, just once, before Jack prompts the Beta Forensic Specialist to continue. ‘Okay, so the mirror pieces all had those smooth prints. Forefinger on the back of the piece wedged in her labia, a smudged thumb on the front.’

‘He polished it after he placed it,’ Will explains, ‘so he could see his face in there.’

‘One in her mouth was obscured with blood,’ Jimmy says. ‘Same with the eyes. Ran an AFIS. He's not in the print index.’

As he speaks, Zeller leaves to fetch a wheeled trolley, on which sits a Lucite stand displaying a set of teeth, molded in resin, with a hinge.

‘We could always run a “Have-You-Seen-These-Teeth?” sort of APB,’ he says, presenting the cast with a flourish. ‘They’re distinctive. Pegged lateral incisors, chipped fangs… I mean, the teeth are *all* crooked… A corner is missing from this central incisor. The other incisor is grooved, here. It looks like a "tailor's notch," the kind of wear you get biting thread.’

‘A snaggle-toothed son of a bitch,’ Jack growls, staring at the unique teeth of their killer.

‘And he bites,’ Zeller adds, making the jaws snap shut in the same way that the killer had done on Mrs. Leeds and Ezra Jacobi. ‘A *lot*.’

‘He may have a history of biting in lesser assaults,’ Will murmurs, remembering the hunger he’d felt at the Leeds’ house. The need to sink his fangs into flesh and feel it give. The need to claim. To *own*. ‘It may be a fighting pattern as much as sexual behavior.’

‘What’s he fighting, Will?’ Jack asks, frowning curiously. Will thinks, but he doesn’t know. He’s missing too many pieces of the puzzle.

It doesn’t elude him that he’d never needed all the pieces, before. He’d never needed as much evidence as he’s relying on, now.

He’d never felt as unsure or blind.

What he'd said to Jack back at the lake is true. He doesn't think about this stuff anymore. And six years is a long time.

Maybe it's time to go home.

***

The bathroom glass in this motel is smaller than the one in Buffalo, so Will's two fingers of whiskey looks like a lot. He doesn't care, though; just gulps half of it back and appreciates the way the liquor burns his throat on the way down.

He puts the cardboard box of evidence on the dresser, and then put it away inside a drawer where he won't see it. He's had enough of the wide-eyed dead.

He calls Molly, wanting to hear her voice. To have her tell him about her day and call him her sweet man.

Please, he thinks, listening to the tones go on and on. *Please answer. Please don't leave me alone with this.*

It's half past seven. Maybe Molly's taken the kids out to dinner? Take their mind off things. Maybe her cell is on silent after a day of work. Maybe… maybe…

Maybe they're outside, tucked up together in a nest of blankets, watching shooting stars.

After the seventh ring, Will gives up. Gulps the rest of his whiskey and then braces himself on the edge of the bed.

His mind is a busy rooming house with arguments all around him, fighting somewhere down the hall. He's numb and empty, far too empty, and he wants so badly to be in Molly's arms, held in her warm embrace.

Alpha.

He shudders. He's too hot. Flushed cheeks and sweaty brow. His shoulders are like stone again and his neck… Christ, his *neck*…

He wants to touch, to squeeze and massage the nape until he's relaxed but he can't bring himself to actually *touch* it. Not when he can still taste Mrs. Leeds' blood on his tongue. When he can still hear her moaned pleas to *just let her die.* To make the pain stop… To make it all go away.

Put your head back. Close your eyes. Wade into the quiet of the stream.

Hannibal's voice comes as a low, sensual purr, and Will's breath hitches on a sob. He forces himself to lie down, flat on his back, and stares up at the beige ceiling. A single tear tracks down his cheek and he thinks of Mrs. Leeds. Blood had run from her mirrored eyes just like his saltwater wetness, like the legs of spectacles over her temples and ears.

I can't see his face, Jack. I have no idea who he is.

It isn't just about reconstructing the thinking using the evidence. It's… like faith. And he lost his faith six years ago, when he watched Hannibal allow himself to be shackled and escorted away by the FBI.

He misses him so much.

The thought comes, unbidden. Insidious. Relentless.

Will rolls onto his side and stuffs his knuckles between his teeth, biting hard enough to draw blood. He stifles a whimper, and then another, and then he's shaking with the force of suppressing a piercing howl that threatens to bring every Alpha in the building rushing to break down his door.

Fuck… Fuck, fuck! I can't do this! I can't… I can't do this!

Imaginary fingers stroke through his hair, tangling in the curls and scraping across his scalp. Will has no idea how long he lies there, hugging his knees to his chest, feeling his heart break in two, all the while with strong, Alpha hands comforting him. Lips ghost across his cheek, his temple, across the silver scar on his forehead, and Will surprises himself with the rasping purr that rises, instinctive and uninhibited.

He rolls towards the touch, desperate for more.

Alpha…

The bed dips away from him and Will chases the weight but his fingers grasp nothing but air. He stares at the empty pillow beside him, hands clenched into white-knuckled fists, and something hard loosens from deep inside him.

He knows what he needs to do.

***

The next morning, he meets Jack in his office at Quantico.

'You were asking about the dog?' Jack says, glancing up from over the top of his half-moon spectacles as he inspected the file on the desk before him. 'Last night, a vet called the police. Leeds and one of the twins took the dog into the vets the afternoon before they were killed.'

'What's gonna happen to it?' Will asks, his eyes glowing gold, burning more brightly when Jack removes his glasses with a weary sigh.

'Please,' the Alpha groans, 'don't worry about the dog.'

Will snorts and rolls his eyes, lips pulling up into a bitter smile.

'What do you expect me to do?'

'The best you *can*, that's all,' Jack replies. 'Busywork's been a narcotic for me sometimes, especially after I quit the booze. For you too, I think.'

‘There is something else I can do,’ Will says, almost too quietly for Jack to hear. He tilts his head, unconsciously baring the side of his throat in a subtly appeasing gesture, even as sweet Omegan pheromones roll off him. ‘I can *wait*… until I’m driven to it by desperation… in the last days before the full moon… Or…’ He takes a deep breath, trying to steady his fluttering pulse. ‘I could do it *now*… while it might be of some use.’

He can feel how pained and pleading his expression is, but Jack is more sickened by the *hope* in his eyes.

Hope, he knows, that the mere idea of *seeing* Hannibal Lecter again has created in him.

But he has to ask. He has to know for sure.

He settles his weight on his elbows and rests his chin on his clasped hands, looking up from under furrowed brows.

‘Is there an *opinion* that you want, Will?’

‘It’s… a *mindset* that I need to recover,’ Will explains, holding Jack’s gaze with a daring he never would have managed before. With a certainty he never would have felt. But he knows, now. He’s known all along, really. Last night just confirmed it for him.

‘I have to see Hannibal.’

***

It takes less than three hours for Jack to arrange the visit. Will drives himself there, taking a rental car instead of one of the FBI SUVs because he can’t stand the idea of the cloying, choking scent of foreign Alphas all around him.

It takes him twenty minutes to gather enough courage to go into the building that still haunts his nightmares, and he pauses several times on his way up the steps. He stares at the gray building, loathing every brick, every pane of glass, every plank of wood.

He tastes the powdery mashed potato and soggy vegetables of the meals Matthew Brown serves to him. Feels the soreness at his inner thighs and across the nape of his neck, where the rough fabric of the hospital boxers and uniform chafes his sensitive skin.

An orderly greets him at Reception. Will has no idea what he’s saying. It’s as if he’s underwater, and everything is muted.

He follows the white-clad Beta through the halls, his heart lurching when he sees the all-too-familiar door leading to his own former cell block.

Hannibal, however, doesn’t appear to be kept with the regular inmates. They ride the elevator to the top floor, away from the muffled screams of demented minds.

The scent of incense grows stronger. Will can hear the hush of prayer; religious fervor and awe for the divine. White tiled floors give way to age-worn marble, graven with a skull, and overhead bulbs become softer. Muted. Sunlight and candles.

He's in the Normal Chapel again. The foyer to a Memory Palace that he shares with Hannibal.

His own rooms have fallen into disrepair, long-since abandoned and carefully avoided, even in his dreams, but the entrance hall remains pristine.

Hannibal spends a lot of time here, Will knows. It is preferable, after all, to the solitary cell in which he finds himself.

He pushes open the wrought-iron gate and steps onto the aisle.

Alpha.

Hannibal stands with his back turned to him, his face upturned and eyes on the painted image of the Omegan Jesus *Pantocrator.* His ashen hair is shorter than Will remembers; a cheap prison cut that he no doubt despises. His shoulders are a little less broad, his waist a little less trim, but he still cuts a striking figure in the plaid suit he's chosen to wear in this visage, and Will's pulse falters. His breath leaves him in a rush and he smells himself; thick and sweet. His belly clenches and an ache, hovering somewhere between pleasure and pain, wrings a low whine from him.

Inside the glass-fronted cell, Hannibal feels his own heart sip a beat at the sound of Will's distress. He sets his drawing down – his beloved Omega, arms wrapped around their children, or, at least, how he imagines their children now look, strangers as they are to him – and turns around to look upon him.

Will removes his glasses and tucks them into a pocket of the waxed jacket draped over his arm. Memories assault him, battering away his defenses until he's as exposed as the day they Bonded. He remembers their first kiss. Their first time. The dark, delicious thrill when they Courted, each of them sending killers after the other.

He remembers the night Hannibal Cut him. The night he tried to take it all away, and set Will free in a way he never wanted.

When he speaks, his voice is heavy with a thousand possible futures. A thousand "what ifs" and "maybes".

'Hello, Dr Lecter.'

Hannibal locks eyes with him. Red and gold. Alpha and Omega. Two sides of the same coin. Perfect opposites. Perfect equals.

He takes a slow, deep breath, scenting him, and allows the flavors of the Omega to settle on his tongue.

Will is conflicted. Frightened, yes, and fear does smell so very *good* on him. He's also flushed with anger, tingling with desire and desperately lonely.

Six years is a long time, and everybody knows that Omegas are not designed to be alone.

‘Hello, Will.’

And the Woman Clothed with the Sun

Chapter Summary

Hannibal agrees to help Will profile the Tooth Fairy, sparking memories of their early relationship. Francis Dolarhyde meets Reba McClane, a blind Beta colleague at Gateway Corporation, and they begin to form a romantic relationship.

The Great Red Dragon contacts Hannibal.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! So... first of all, THANK YOU to those still subscribing to this story. I apologise wholeheartedly for the ridiculously long delay in getting this chapter posted. I really have no excuse, I just needed a break from my Hannigram fics.

I hope this instalment lives up to expectations, and I will post again ASAP, I promise. I haven't forgotten the story, I promise it isn't abandoned, it's just going at a snail's pace... If said snail was crawling through glue... Whilst in dire need of caffeine.

Anywho. I hope you all enjoy! Take care, peeps, and, as always, stay safe! xxx

NINE

And the Woman Clothed with the Sun

The door clicks shut behind Will, sealing him into the room. It’s an ominous sound; too final for his liking.

Hannibal stands with his back to the wall of security glass, holding something in his hands. Scattered on the desk before him are graphite-pencil sketches, blank letter-writing paper and envelopes, and an open copy of Alexandre Dumas's *Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine.*

Hannibal visibly stiffens at the hesitant sound of Will’s approach. He feels his upper lip curl back from his fangs and, for just a moment, he feels ugly hatred for the timid Omega.

You’ve grown weak, Will. You were so strong before.

Aloud, he adopts a cold, mocking tone.

‘*That’s* the same atrocious aftershave you wore in court.’

He sets his sketch of Will, as the Virgin Mary, holding their children, down and turns around, bracing himself. Nonetheless, he can’t quite keep his pulse from racing when he sets eyes on his former mate again.

Will looks… Tired. Drawn. His hair is more flecked with gray than it was, lightening his temples. The curls are cropped short, swept to the side and down to cover the scar across his forehead. His beard is thicker than before, not by much but enough to widen his jaw, giving him a gruffer appearance. His body, hidden as it is beneath dark jeans, a shirt and knitted sweater, remains trim and toned, testament to whatever hard labor job he doubtless keeps.

Exquisite, Hannibal thinks, though he yearns to see the Omega’s dark shadow again. He can sense it, repressed, smothered, pushed deep beneath a veneer of normalcy, and his own beast howls against the injustice of it.

He mentions court as a deliberate taunt and, with no little satisfaction, sees the barb stick. Will’s stormy blue eyes flicker gold, the irises filling until they glow like two suns inside his pale, perfect face.

The trial had been long and vicious, and Will had been spared none of it. As Hannibal Lecter’s former mate, he had been painted as a helpless victim of a sadistic Alpha. Bonded without his consent, manipulated into believing he was a killer and then manipulated into *actual* murder… Impregnated with monstrous seed and then Cut, stabbed and rendered, everyone knew, childless by a deranged cannibal with no thought for anyone but himself.

It was their secret; his, his father’s, Hannibal’s and Jack’s, that the twins were alive. That they had survived, despite Hannibal’s attempt to terminate the pregnancy.

His Pops had stayed with the twins whenever Will was needed in Baltimore. Will had sat with Jack in the courtroom, eyes hidden behind tinted glasses, head bowed, fingers picking at the skin around his nails whenever his relationship was mentioned.

He’d given a statement of fact only when ordered by the judge, as succinct as he could get away with.

Dr Lecter Bonded me, and then manipulated my Heats, making me suffer through extended Prodromal Phasing, despite knowing the risks to my long-term mental and physical health. He had me imprisoned at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, accused of crimes that he himself had committed. He encouraged me to kill the Alpha, Randall Tier, and prepared a meal with meat that he knew was human.

When he discovered that I had been working with Special Agent Jack Crawford and the FBI, he Cut the crest from my neck, severing our Pair Bond, and proceeded to stab me in the abdomen, puncturing my uterus. I was three months pregnant at the time.

When I had recovered from the attack, I went to Florence, Italy, to find him. Hannibal shot me in my right shoulder and then proceeded to attempt to cut open my skull, intending to eat my brain. We were kidnapped by hired mercenaries of Mason Verger and taken to Muskrat

Farm. Hannibal got free and rescued me from a transplant surgery that was going to be performed without anesthesia. He took me back to my house in Wolf Trap, where he remained until he surrendered to the FBI.

‘Hello, Dr Lecter,’ Will whispers, his voice low and rasping, the name an unfamiliar taste on his tongue.

Hannibal gazes at him, red eyes locked onto gold. The thin line of glass between them makes it look as if they are disparate reflections in a mirror.

Two halves of the same whole.

‘Hello, Will.’ His melodic purr hangs in the air between them, slow to fade, and Hannibal is pleased to see Will tighten his grip on the case file tucked under his arm. ‘Did you get my note?’

‘I got it,’ Will manages, feeling as if there’s a rock lodged in his throat. ‘Thank you.’

‘Did you read it before you destroyed it?’ Hannibal asks, disregarding false pretenses. He’s never had to pretend with Will, after all. ‘Or did you simply toss it into the nearest fire?’

‘I read it,’ Will growls, brows lowering into a mulish frown. ‘And then I burned it.’

‘And you came anyway,’ Hannibal murmurs, considering Will’s strength. His precious need to do *right* by a cruel, unjust world.

My sweet boy. You still hold such hope for redemption.

He steps closer to the glass and he doesn’t miss the way Will plants his feet, refusing to flinch away. The Omega does swallow, though; an instinctive reflex to gulp back a sound. A whine, perhaps? Or a growl?

‘I’m glad you came,’ he continues, low and intimate. ‘My other callers are all… *professional*.’ His eyes gleam; he knows how often Will, too, endured such visits when he was incarcerated. ‘Banal psychiatrists and grasping second-raters. *Pencil-lickers.’*

Disdain drips from every syllable, and Will lowers his gaze in helpless agreement. They each despise being seen as a specimen. A tool.

A fragile little teacup, used only for special occasions. Brought out to be studied and admired. Unworthy opinions heaped upon assumptions, based upon beliefs at odds with our own moralities.

‘I want you to help me, Dr Lecter,’ Will admits, glancing back up at the caged Alpha. Even here, like this, trapped behind a pane of tempered glass, with sealed windows and a cemented-shut fireplace, Hannibal is a dangerous predator.

He is the one in control.

He’s always playing.

‘Yes, I thought so.’ Hannibal tilts his head, narrowing his eyes a fraction. ‘… Are we no longer on a first-name basis?’

Memories of their last night together flash between them. Licking and suckling each other’s necks, scenting and marking in turn. Hands always moving, fingers gripping tight, stroking and smoothing hair, squeezing muscles and lightly scratching with nails. Slow lovemaking made all the sweeter by the shimmering thread of emotion stretched between their minds.

I don’t want to think about you anymore.

‘I’m… more comfortable the less *personal* we are,’ Will lies, his voice shaking.

Hannibal regards him, face schooled to blankness. His nostrils flare as he takes in the scents coming through the holes in the glass, burgundy eyes flaring to red before dulling again.

The same color as old blood, Will thinks, and he fights back another shudder.

‘I smell dogs,’ the Alpha sneers. ‘And pine, and oil beneath that shaving lotion. It’s something a child would select, isn’t it?’

Icy fear grips Will’s heart and he knows it shows on his face but Hannibal ignores it, continuing, pointedly,

‘How *are* my children, Will?’

Will flicks his gaze up towards the red light of the security cameras. Alana promised him she doesn’t record the speech in here, but he *can’t* let her find out that Hannibal Lecter has children. He *can’t*.

He has to protect his family.

‘I came about Chicago and Buffalo,’ he manages, forcing the words past a painful tightness, his eyes blurry with the first hint of tears. ‘You’ve read about it.’

‘I’ve read the papers,’ Hannibal replies. ‘I can’t clip them.’ A sly smile. ‘They won’t let me have scissors, of course.’ A pause. ‘You want to know how he’s choosing them.’

‘Thought you would have some ideas,’ Will says, shifting uncomfortably under the intensity of the Alpha’s stare.

How are my children, Will? How are our *children? Our son. Our daughter.*

A golden thread shimmers, winding through the reality of space between them. It knots at each end, an irresistible tug towards the other. Will feels as if Hannibal has opened a door into his mind and is rummaging around inside his memories, selecting images of Daniel and Gracie fishing, playing with the dogs, going to school. The day they got the diagnosis of Daniel’s deafness, and Will went straight online to sign up for a course in ASL. The day Gracie bit a playground bully who pushed Daniel over and made him cry.

The boy had needed seven stitches, and he still had a scar.

Hannibal sniffs. Swallows. Pushes the newly-acquired knowledge down to process later, when he is alone.

Will needs him. And he promised to help him.

He cannot resist a small needle, however. He does so *love* when Will is riled. All he needs is a little push. A little reminder, perhaps, of how *good* they were together.

'You just came here to look at me,' he taunts, and *there's* the shadow he's been searching for. *There's* Will's dark fury, setting fire to his eyes, incensed at the crude reference to their last lovemaking session, and how much they gazed upon each other. How much they touched and tasted and scent-marked. 'Came to get the old *scent* again… Why don't you just smell yourself?'

I was so deep inside you, Will; your insides are stained with me.

Will scoffs, a bitter, reproachful sound, and turns away.

'I expected more of you, Doctor.' He shakes his head, eyes dulling with disappointment and seething resentment. 'That routine… it's old hat.'

'Whereas *you* are a new man,' Hannibal says, coming right up to the glass, eyes firmly locked on Will's slender white throat, bared to him as the other man presents his profile, eyes lowered submissively. He purrs, just once, the sound designed to soothe the rattled Omega, and then asks, deliberately, 'Are you a good father, Will?'

Will raises his head and glares at him. His abdominal scar twinges, reminding him of the ongoing pain he feels whenever he allows himself a Heat – one of the many reasons he's returned to suppressants – and of Danny's frustration at his own physical limitations.

Most likely caused by trauma in the womb, given what you experienced.

'Let me have the file,' Hannibal continues, before Will bolts. 'An hour and we can discuss it, like old times.'

'Thank you,' Will whispers, and Hannibal nods, just once. An accord, and an understanding. When Will moves to the metal tray, the only portal into his cell from this side of the room, Hannibal moves in perfect synchronicity. Their footsteps match, they breathe in time and Will has the disquieting sense that even their heartbeats are in rhythm.

'Family values may have declined over the last century,' Hannibal says, waiting to receive the file in the tray, 'but we still help our families when we can.' He dips his head, catching Will's gaze and holding it, again. 'You *are* family, Will.'

Will stares, a wave of sudden emotion for Hannibal overwhelming him. He cannot name it – he doesn't know what it could *possibly* be, after everything that's happened between them – so he just swallows it down, crushing the urge to whine, and walks away.

Christ. He needs a shower and a stiff drink.

He can do neither, however, so he settles for a strong black coffee, no sugar, from the vending machine, and sits directly beneath the cold air puffing out of the ceiling vent. His shirt is clinging, the armpits soaked, and he can smell a faint hint of something he hasn't experienced in six years.

He shifts, awkward and self-conscious on the vinyl chair, and is saved when Alana Bloom, resplendent in red lipstick and a striped black and white blazer with white slacks, invites him to join her in her office.

It's a welcome distraction and he happily leaves his cup of cheap coffee steaming, forgotten, on the waiting room table.

'Do you want a drink?' Alana asks, closing the door behind her and watching the Omega pace, restless and irritable, around the living area space of what was once Dr Chilton's office.

'Er, no… Thanks,' Will says distractedly. He scrubs the back of his head, mussing up his curls, and keeps hold of his coat, keeping it draped over his forearm like a shield.

Alana sits on one of the studded leather couches, an arm across the back, long legs crossed at the knee. She is the picture of Alpha confidence and poise, perfectly at ease in her territory.

Will can barely remember what she was like when she was a Beta. Her new caste suits her well.

'It's good to see you looking so well, Will,' Alana says, red-ringed eyes noting the healthy flush to his skin, the lingering tan from a summer spent outside, and the callouses on his hands. 'But I can't help wishing you weren't here.'

'Wishing and hoping,' Will mutters, glancing over and then away again, offering a bitter smile.

Alana purses her lips.

'How did it feel… to see him again?' she asks, and Will visibly fights down a shudder. He blinks rapidly, as if shaking away a vision of something and ducks his head, baring the flushed nape of his neck to the cool air of the office. Alana's eyes flick to it, to the ridged and scarred flesh just visible beneath the collar of his shirt, and her stomach twists as she remembers the night in the townhouse. Even outside, even through the agony of broken limbs and crushed organs, she had heard his scream of pain when Hannibal Cut the crest from him, and had wanted to comfort him. To save him.

'Like… er…' Will takes a deep, wobbling breath, trying to calm his jittery nerves. 'Like Hannibal was looking through to the back of my skull,' he admits, and the Alpha's first assessment of him – *no forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love* – reverberates. He can feel himself shaking and his voice is just as unsteady as he sighs and adds, 'Felt like a… a *fly* flitting around back there.'

Alana nods, just once. She understands all too well. It's one of the reasons she limits her interactions with the other Alpha.

Will's nape tingles, hot as an iron, and he reaches for it before stopping himself. Balling his hand tight, he gives his arm a shake, dislodging more words.

'I had the… *absurd* feeling that he walked out with me,' he confesses, golden eyes bright with a dangerous mixture of fear and longing. 'I had to… to st-stop outside the doors and look around, make sure I was alone.'

He manages a thin smile but Alana doesn't return it. She just nods again, her voice soft as she says,

'I know that feeling.'

No, Will thinks, everything in him screaming that what he feels with Hannibal is different. Is something *she* can never understand.

Because she's not an Omega, and she was never Pair Bonded to him.

'Well,' Alana sighs, blue eyes gentle as she continues to watch the nervous man, 'at least *Jack Crawford* is pleased.'

They both share a chuckle, remembering all the times Alana used to act as a buffer between him and Jack. The nights they would curl up together in front of the space heater with the dogs, a pizza and a bottle of wine, working on case notes for some new lecture or profile that Jack wanted Will's help with.

'He showed me pictures of the families,' Will says, relaxing enough to lay his coat over the back of an armchair that matches the couch. 'I looked at Molly and the kids and I couldn't say no.'

'And Jack was counting on it,' Alana replies, anger making the crimson rings around her irises thicken. Then, as Will sighs again and lowers himself to the seat beside her, thigh-muscles fluttering with fatigue, she asks, 'How are they? Molly and the kids?'

Will glances up, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he thinks of his family. Alana believes the twins are his adopted children – Molly's from her previous marriage – and that's perfect. Nobody outside of his immediate family needs know anything different.

'They're good,' he says. 'Walter's got a spot on the local ice hockey team. Gracie and Danny are in their first year of Elementary… They're talking about Gracie joining the Spelling Bee Team in the new term.' He leans back but the collar of his shirt presses like a razor against the sensitive skin of his neck and he sits up again, blushing. He can smell how sweet his scent is; it's not just hormones but the first hint of something more.

Something… intimate.

He clears his throat and searches for something else, anything else, to talk about.

'How's Margot?' he asks, drying his palms on his jeans. Alana, thankfully, allows the distraction.

‘She’s good. She’s enjoying being a mother.’ At Will’s surprised eyebrow, she grins. ‘We have a son. A Verger son. His name is Morgan. He’ll be five next month.’

‘How…?’ Will frowns, remembering the accident. Remembering…

‘I carried him,’ Alana explains, and Will suddenly feels like an idiot because he knows what must have happened.

He’s Mason’s.

‘He’s the Verger heir,’ Alana confirms, and Will latches onto it to keep from dwelling on exactly how – and when – Alana and Margot managed to get Mason’s seed.

‘Then… what are you doing *here?’* he asks, gesturing to the office. The wider hospital. They both know how much Alana hates clinical settings, and, if she’s as rich as all that…

Alana sets her teeth.

‘There are only five doors between Hannibal and the outside,’ she says. ‘And I have the keys to *all* of them.’ She doesn’t miss the way Will’s own jaw clenches at that – at the idea of her as his former Alpha’s jailor. ‘Hannibal’s never been… *great*… with boundaries.’ She closes her eyes, thinking of how much he fucked with her – having sex with her, even though he was Bonded to Will. Making her love him. Trust him. Defend him.

‘"He who sups with the Devil needs a long spoon",’ she quotes, remembering how Hannibal gave her Mason’s seed, securing Margot’s freedom and providing them with an heir, all whilst binding her to him in a blood debt still to be repaid.

Will frowns at her and then his eyes widen. He flinches and gets up from the couch in a creak of leather and rustle of fabric, turning his back on her as he stares out at the bleak parking lot and leaf-strewn gardens beyond the paned window.

‘I’m not letting him *in*, Alana,’ he says, forcing himself to take a deep, steadying breath because it already feels like a lie. Hannibal doesn’t *need* Will to let him in. He never left. ‘Don’t worry about me.’

‘I’m not just worried about you,’ Alana replies. ‘Last time, it didn’t *end* with you.’

Will turns, his retort already dying on his lips. He remembers the night of the attack; remembers Alana’s broken, bleeding body on the garden path. Remembers Abigail’s throat, slit so deep that it showed bone, spraying blood everywhere. He remembers Florence, and Rinaldo Pazzi…

He thinks of the twins. Of Danny’s hearing impairment, likely caused by the nuchalectomy blade piercing the womb. Of how tiny and fragile he’d been as a newborn; on oxygen for weeks, his little lungs underdeveloped and kidneys struggling.

No. It’s never been just Hannibal and Will. Someone else always suffers the consequences of their love.

***

After exactly one hour, Will returns to Hannibal's cell. The elevator doors swish open and metal bars clang behind him, taking him through each airlock.

Ahead of him is the pair of elegant double doors leading to Hannibal's private cell. A buzzer sounds and the doors open automatically, revealing the vast room and the glass cell occupying the far end.

Nearly three times the size of mine, Will thinks, wondering why he feels jealous. After all, he only had to spend a few weeks in his dungeon – Hannibal has been here for years.

Hannibal sits at his plain, bolted-down desk, studying the files, centered in the otherwise-empty room. He is playing Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, the music a jarring accompaniment to the horrors in his hands.

He looks up at Will, stood waiting beyond the glass.

'This is a very shy boy, Will,' he says, his eyes shining with the same passion Will remembers from the early days of their relationship. 'I'd love to meet him.'

'I'm sure you would,' Will replies drily, and he feels a shift in the air. The room changes; they're in Hannibal's office; Hannibal sits at his grand desk, the pages of the file lit by his brass reading lamp. It is, aside from the ever-present fire in the hearth behind him, the only real source of the light in the otherwise dark room.

It was never dark in reality, but this isn't reality. This is *their* private place.

This room will always be a sanctuary to them both. Will casts surreptitious looks around – he hasn't been here in years, but Hannibal has maintained the furniture, the drapes and the mezzanine library to perfection within their Memory Palace. No dust or cobwebs or faded details. Just perfection, edged in shadow.

'Have you considered that he is disfigured, or that he believes he is disfigured?' Hannibal asks, and Will pretends to think about it, even though the knowledge is already there, cemented in his mind.

'That's interesting,' he replies, earning himself a frown from the other man.

'That's not interesting,' Hannibal says, warning against insipid agreement. He gathers the file together and rises, moving around the desk as he adds, 'You thought of that before.'

Will hums, accepting the truth, and selects the photograph of the first Omega, killed along with his Alpha and two children in Chicago.

'He smashed all the mirrors in the houses,' he says, 'not just enough to get the pieces he wanted. These shards are set so he can see himself in their eyes. Ezra Jacobi and Mrs. Leeds. And their families.'

‘Could you see yourself in their eyes, Will?’ Hannibal asks, his voice a low, hungry purr as he adds, seductively, ‘Killing them all?’

Another shift. Will feels Hannibal’s influence on their psyches, and when he looks down again, he is in the Jacobi’s house. They stand together at the foot of the master bed, staring down at the dead Omega with the shards of mirror obscuring his wide, dead, golden eyes and full mouth.

The same shadows hug the edges of the scene, but there is enough light from the crack in the bedroom curtains that the blood-smeared shards of mirror shine.

‘The first small bond to the killer itches and stings like a leech,’ Hannibal says, prowling behind him. Admiring the other killer’s handiwork through Will’s eyes.

Will turns away from the Omega. Moves to look at the remains of the vanity mirror. The fragments of reflective glass on the carpet… The cracked remains inside the frame.

‘Like *you*, Will,’ Hannibal murmurs, his voice slithering deep inside to stroke awake the beast slumbering inside its cage, ‘he needs a family to escape what’s inside him.’

Will watches as a shard falls. A piece of himself. His own, fractured psyche… Broken after Hannibal Cut him. Patched and glued back together, held together but so tender… So fragile.

One wrong move and –

He shivers. Watches as Hannibal reaches down for the fallen piece.

When the Alpha tilts the glass, however, looking at his reflection, his truth is shown there.

White, sightless eyes. Black skin, stretched thin over brittle bones. Sharp antlers.

Endless hunger. Endless need. You’ll just keep consuming me, until there’s nothing left, and you’ll still want more. More than I can ever give.

‘You know a fair amount about how these families died,’ Hannibal says, taking control of the dreamscape again, moving them to the Jacobi’s living area, distracting Will and providing him an anchor to save himself. ‘How they *lived* is how he chooses them.’

Will glares at the Scandinavian-style dining table, set with clear plastic chairs, and the steel fruit bowl as centerpiece.

‘How is he choosing them?’ he asks, struggling to ground himself, even in this reality. Struggling because being close to Hannibal again makes his throat ache and his chest tighten. Makes him hot and irritable, and he wants to be *done* with it.

‘How did *you* choose *yours?’* Hannibal replies, drawing a scathing frown from the other man. ‘A ready-made wife and child… A ready-made mother and older sibling to serve your needs? A stepson… or daughter…’ The Alpha catches the way Will tenses, and he knows. ‘A stepson absolves you of any further biological blame. *And,’* he adds, tilting his head to his

former mate, his eyes flashing a warning crimson, ‘you know better than to breed with anyone else.’

Will glares at him, but he doesn’t say anything. What can he say, after all?

Hannibal is right. He can’t breed with anyone else. He’s tainted by his bond to the Alpha before him… And he’s biologically *incompatible* with Molly.

One of the reasons he chose her, after all.

No risk.

In their shared imagination, Hannibal moves to the floor-to-ceiling windows of the dining room, the case file open in his hands.

‘Why are there no descriptions of the grounds?’ he asked, lifting a page to examine the image beneath. ‘I see floor plans… diagrams of the rooms where death occurred… What were the yards like?’

A blink, and they are outside the Jacobi’s house, in their back yard. It’s night; a full moon hangs low in the sky, bloated with its own light. A thick layer of snow covers the lawn, and Will’s breath lingers in clouds before his mouth when he replies.

‘Big. Fenced, with trees… Why?’

‘Because, if this pilgrim feels a special relationship with the moon,’ Hannibal explains, gazing up at the silvery orb, ‘he might like to go outside and look at it, before he tidies himself up.’ He waits until Will turns to gaze at the moon again, before continuing, overly casually, ‘If one were *nude*, say, it would be better to have outdoor privacy for that sort of thing.’ A smirk. ‘One must show some consideration for the neighbors.’

Will blinks. The new knowledge sits heavy in his mind. Another thread, connecting him to the killer.

I didn’t want anyone to notice as I made my offering to the moon… As I reveled in what I had done.

‘Have you ever seen blood in the moonlight, Will?’ Hannibal asks, and, in their shared place, their conjoined mind, he watches as the Omega lifts his hand up to the silver light. ‘It appears quite black.’

Blood coats his skin. It grows tacky as it dries in the freezing air, plastering his hair down, and Will shivers, but not from cold. More blood slides down his front. Clots of it tug uncomfortably on his pubic hair, but he feels a deep sense of peace. His knot has deflated, and he is satisfied.

His hunger has been sated.

For now.

With an almighty effort, he wrenches himself from the fantasy and forces them both back to the cell.

‘I need to know how he’s choosing them,’ he repeats, growing more frantic the longer Hannibal simply smiles at him, guarding his secrets well. ‘Why *them?* Why *those* two Omegas?’

‘Dead, they are mere puppets,’ Hannibal replies, shaking his head to dispel the notion of importance. ‘You need to see them *living*. The way they caught his eye.’

‘That’s impossible,’ Will snaps, and he feels his eyes pulse gold when Hannibal smirks at him.

‘Almost, not quite. When you return for another of these little chin-wags, I do expect you to bring pictures of my children.’

‘No.’ It’s an immediate response; an instinctive urge to protect his young. Hannibal is dangerous, and he has already proven himself a liability to their health.

Hannibal takes the rejection in his stride, though his shoulders stiffen. He pushes himself up from the table and walks around it, approaching the glass.

Will has the sense that he could walk right through it if he wanted to.

‘Have you returned to fixing boat-motors, Will?’ the Alpha asks, and Will slants a scowl at him.

‘They’re less dangerous than criminal minds,’ he replies, earning himself a smile from the Alpha.

‘Indeed.’ Hannibal considers Will for a long moment, giving Will the chance to study him in turn. His new haircut isn’t as attractive as the longer style he favored before, but somehow still accentuates his strong jaw, as well as his scars. Will notices more gray flecking the ashen strands, now, just as it lightens his own, and he has the irrational urge to slide his hand through the air vents in the Perspex wall so he can touch the other man again.

‘Are they treating you well?’ he asks, before he can stop himself. He can tell Hannibal is surprised by the question – flattered, too, and he doesn’t bother to hide the blush warming his cheeks. What’s the point? Hannibal can smell his care; his embarrassment.

He’s almost forgotten how sharp an Alpha’s senses are, given his time with Molly and the other Betas of Moosehead Lake.

‘They treat me well enough,’ Hannibal replies, his tone warm at Will’s expression of concern. His affection. ‘And you? Is your… new *partner* a good match?’

Will catches the hint of jealousy despite the subtlety of the question, designed to tease out details of his relationship with Molly.

If he’s bonded to her, or not.

‘She’s a Beta,’ he confirms. ‘She’s good with the kids.’

Hannibal takes another step closer, clasping his hands in front of him. If they both reached down and out, they could link fingers…

Will swallows, his pulse racing.

‘You look flushed, Will. Are you allowing yourself to experience regular Heats?’ Hannibal asks, ratcheting Will’s blush up another notch.

‘That is none of your business!’ he snarls, glaring when Hannibal just grins. ‘We’re not Bonded, remember? That wasn’t *my* choice, Hannibal. That was *you*.’

‘Do you still wish things had gone differently?’ Hannibal says, dragging Will’s attention, helplessly, back to their past. Their shared pain, and every betrayal dealt to each other. *‘I* do.’

A moment passes, and then another. Emotions batter Will, too fast to recognize but a few.

Grief. Love. Anger. Fear.

Dragging his hands through his curls, Will stalks to the sliding tray.

‘Give me back the file,’ he snaps, hating how tight his throat feels. How *hot* his skin is. ‘Now.’

‘Of course.’

Hannibal gathers the papers back together and returns the folder to the tray, allowing Will to take it. He wonders when the Omega will submit to his instincts and scent the manila; will he last until the privacy of his car or will he need to dip his nose to it the moment he leaves the room?

He watches, amused, as Will clutches the file to his chest, almost, *almost* sniffing it then and there, before the Omega turns on his heel and leaves without another word.

The moment the double doors to Hannibal’s cell click shut behind him, Will brings the folder to his nose and bows his shoulders as he sucks up the scent of the Alpha.

Fuck.

He should never have come.

***

By the time Will gets outside, he’s shaking with adrenaline and feverish. Sweat beads on his forehead, even as he bundles himself up.

He needs the layers. He doesn’t want anyone to see him. Doesn’t want anyone to touch him.

Why the hell did he suggest going to see Hannibal? What a stupid idea. The man is back inside his head now; hell, he might as well be walking out with him.

He's so distracted that he doesn't notice the rapid-fire click of a camera. Doesn't see a red-headed Alpha female taking photo after photo as he emerges from the psychiatric hospital.

Doesn't see the way she straightens with a smirk when she catches the perfect image of him, outlined sharply against the engraved words: "Criminally Insane".

Oh, yes. Freddie Lounds knows exactly how to sell a story.

***

After Will leaves, Hannibal's orderlies enter the cell and cuff him in position before the plexiglass wall, leaving Alana Bloom free to enter and search the room at her leisure. She prowls the other Alpha's space, openly invading his territory and casually marking things with her scent. This is a regular occurrence, of course; a reminder that, despite the niceties, he remains a prisoner, *her* prisoner, and she is the more dominant Alpha right now by virtue of being free.

Hannibal knows, however, that she is careful never to debate her relative "freedom" with him, however. Her reign is tenuous at best; an illusion at worst and they both know it.

Instead, he stands patiently as his former friend and lover clicks around the cell in her high heels and power suit.

Her taste in clothing certainly has improved with her elevated caste.

He does, however, suspect why she is here, and he gives her a moment to inspect the drawings on his desk. Alana herself, as Botticelli's *Fortitude* seems to draw her gaze.

'You've come to wag your finger?' he asks, earning himself a reproachful frown that he can see in the reflection of the plastic barrier.

'I love a good finger-wagging,' Alana replies, as cool and dismissive as ever around him.

Hannibal's eyes gleam.

'Yes, you do,' he agrees. Then, because he can, 'How *is* Margot?'

To stave an irritated growl at the way Hannibal can, for all his sophistication, be such a *brat* at times, Alana casually picks up another drawing. Will, in a chilling rendition of the *Lamentation of Christ*.

'Your cogs are turning, Hannibal,' she says. 'I can hear them clicking.'

Hannibal clicks his tongue in response, and then, soft and dark,

'Boom.'

The word, so innocuous on its own, but so laden with meaning for the pain Hannibal has caused her in the past, sends a shiver of fear down Alana's spine. She narrows her red eyes at him.

'I don't know what you're *planning* with Will Graham,' she says, leaning on the edge of the bolted table, her spine twinging in remembered pain of the multiple fractures all those years ago. 'But you're planning something. Why wouldn't you be? You've already cracked the lid… Can't resist peeling it back.'

The reference to his attempts to eat his own mate's brains is clear as day, but Hannibal doesn't flinch. The man is as immune to guilt and shame as he is to physical torture.

'Will came to *me*,' Hannibal replies, as if somehow proving his innocence.

Alana scoffs, moving away from the table, inspecting the sealed fireplace and the bookshelves as she replies, dismissively,

'Yes, he did.'

Of course he did. You got so far inside his head, you're still pulling his strings whether he knows it or not.

'I advised him against it,' Hannibal points out, earning another snort.

'I'm sure.'

This time, when the other Alpha speaks, there's a note of tension in his voice.

'Are you *suggesting* I don't have Will's best interests in my mind?'

Alana turns, barking an incredulous laugh. Christ, Hannibal really is a piece of work.

'I'm stating it as *fact*.'

Listening to the squeak of her patent leather shoes, Hannibal tracks her approach. He listens to her pause again, stopping beside the table, facing him, and he locks eyes with her pale reflection in the glass as he needles her.

'You've got Will dressed up in moral dignity pants. Nothing is his fault.'

Sweet little Omega… Except he isn't. He has the same darkness inside him that I do. It's what attracted me to him. What holds my interest.

He sees the barb stick. Sees Alana's eyes flare red. Sees her mouth tighten. The warning comes, just as anticipated.

'I've been courteous,' the younger Alpha says. 'And you've been receptive to courtesy.' Hannibal gives her the barest flicker of acknowledgement; a nod without a nod, and she comes closer, every inch of her thrumming with tension. 'But these niceties are conditional. And the conditions are non-negotiable.'

A smirk from the arrogant bastard. A sarcastic tilt to his head, almost glancing at her over his shoulder as he replies, blithely,

‘I must behave myself.’

Grinding her molars to keep from baring her teeth in a snarl – knowing she would lose the moment she does – Alana instead chooses to taunt Hannibal with a threat of her own. She presses even closer, taking full-advantage of the shackles chaining him to the floor. Exploiting their power-dynamic by tilting her head and fixing him with a cold, merciless stare as she drops her voice and says, almost gently,

‘I know what you're afraid of.’ Hannibal seems to encourage the confession, still leaning towards her, and Alana allows a rough purr to hang in the air between them. ‘It's not pain or solitude… It's indignity.’ She sneers. ‘You're like a cat that way.’ No response. No tension. No growl, but she can see his mind ticking over the insult. He’s too still for anything else. Narrowing her eyes, she continues, ‘I'll take your books. I'll take your drawings… I'll take your toilet.’

Walking away, leaving him handcuffed and immobile until she deems him fit to be released again, she adds, off-handedly,

‘You'll have nothing but indignity… and the company of the dead.’

***

‘Daddy!’

Gracie’s excited shout, and the accompanying wobble as she tries to both hold the iPad and wave to him, makes Will’s heart swell and he smiles widely as Grace crowds closer to Daniel, forcibly pulling her brother into view.

‘Hey, baby girl,’ he says, before waving to Daniel. ‘Hey, kiddo.’

‘We *miss* you!’ Grace says, setting the tablet on the dining table, propped against the fruit bowl, and holding her chin in her hands. ‘Have you caught the bad man, yet?’

‘Not yet, hon.’ Will grimaces, wishing he didn’t have such bad news for his little girl. ‘Hey, is Molly around?’

‘She and Wally are outside,’ Grace replies, her eyes flitting up towards the window as she speaks. ‘They’re chopping more firewood. It’s so *cold*, Dad! Danny and I had to share a bed last night!’

‘I bet,’ Will chuckles, shaking his head. Any excuse for the twins to cuddle. A shared room, it seems, isn’t enough.

He smiles his thanks at the waitress who comes to top up his coffee, and she murmurs something about his kids being adorable before she leaves him to it.

He's sat in a diner, not far from his motel, having decided to take the rest of the day to comb through case files. He needs… space after visiting Hannibal. He needs to be by himself for a while… To *think.*

'Did you see Dad?' Grace asks, surprising Will with how solemn she is. How mature.

He swallows. Fiddles with the handle of his coffee cup, taking a deep breath and staring down at the curling steam before he nods.

'Yeah,' he murmurs, forcing himself to look back up at his daughter. His son. 'Yeah, baby girl. I did.'

'He made you sad, didn't he?' Grace says, and Will feels tears prick his eyes.

'N-…' He bites off the lie before it can even form and sighs. 'I just… *Get* sad… When I think about him. When I see him.'

'Did he ask about us?' Grace enquires, and Will thinks he really might break down, right there in that diner.

'Jesus… Gracie…' He scrubs a hand over his face, shoving at the wetness leaking from his golden eyes. 'Yeah, he did. Can we… Hey, come on, how are *you* both? Danny…?' He starts to sign again, catching the boy's attention. 'How are *you* doing? Are you okay?'

Danny doesn't respond; barely even lifts his head. Gracie hugs him close and nuzzles his dark curls.

'He's sad for you, Daddy,' she explains. 'He wishes Dad didn't make you so upset.'

'It's not his fault,' Will says, instinctive and immediate. He sighs again, a huffing growl. 'Okay, that's not true; sometimes it *is* his fault. I promised never to lie to you.'

'Dad…?' Gracie's voice is unusually small. She's nervous about something, and Will sits up straighter.

'What is it, sweetheart?' he asks, pulling his phone closer and wishing he could crawl inside the video call and be with his family in Maine. 'What's wrong?'

'You *will* come home, won't you?' Gracie asks, her lower lip wobbling. 'You *promised.'*

'Yeah,' Will says, his voice hoarse. He tries to wet his lips but his mouth is dry. 'Yeah, Gracie. I'll come back for you.' He feels his eyes pulse and knows they're glowing gold, drawing unwanted attention from a few Alphas across the room. 'I will *always* come back for you.'

'We love you, Dad,' Gracie says, and Will purrs, loudly enough that it can carry down the phone to his children.

'I love you too, munchkins.' Pressing his fingertips to his lips and then to the screen, Will smiles when Grace and then, finally, Danny, mimic the kiss. 'Come on,' he says, taking

control of his emotions and the conversation. ‘Tell me what you’ve been up to while I’ve been gone. What homework do you have?’

‘It’s only been two days!’ Gracie protests, and then launches into everything he’s missed since leaving them behind.

Molly and Walter join them after a while and they bully Will into buying a stack of maple syrup pancakes, which they then replicate their end so they can have lunch together. It’s wonderful, and light, and easy, and, when Will finally hangs up, over an hour later, it feels like ripping out his heart.

Fuck. He just wants to go *home*.

***

He doesn’t, of course. He can’t. He still has to catch this killer. He has an appointment with Jack, tomorrow, and an open ticket back to Chicago so he can revisit the Jacobi’s house.

Leaving the bustle of the diner behind, Will drives himself to a local park and goes for a walk. In the bitter cold, with the wind on his cheeks and the sound of dogs around him, he feels almost normal again.

Almost safe.

Across the city, in his glass-walled cell, Hannibal reclines on his cot. He gazes up at the ceiling but it is a sightless stare. Instead, he retreats inside the vast network of rooms within his Memory Palace, adding texture and detail to the new knowledge gained from his earlier visit with Will.

My son is deaf. My daughter protects him.

He knows Will would want him to feel guilty. Knows that Will *does* feel guilty, no matter his innocence in the matter. Hannibal wielded the blade that caused the uterine trauma, that likely caused the impairment, but Will carries a parent’s sense of responsibility, nonetheless.

Hannibal, however, feels nothing but pride for their son. To have survived… To continue to survive… It is testament to his strength.

To Will’s strength.

He shifts the scene. He can feel Will’s presence like a glowing ember and he draws him close, blanketing him in the soothing presence of their safest place.

His office.

Will feels the shift – the wood of the park bench changes to the softer leather of the armchairs he so often finds himself missing. The room is warm from the fire crackling in the hearth and he relaxes, inch by inch, as his Alpha’s thick musk settles over his skin.

I said I wanted to go home… How does he always know?

‘We have a basic affinity for our family,’ Hannibal says, but Will realizes he can’t see him. He can’t *see* anything beyond the black piece of fabric wrapped around his head. Blindfolding him. Calming him. Keeping him placid and immobile in the chair. ‘We, more so than anyone else, can detect each other from smell alone.’

Will inhales, his nostrils flaring as he gathers up the layers of cedarwood and cloves; the sharpness of steel and something softer… Something dry.

‘Do you recognize this?’ Hannibal asks, looking down as Will scents the bone-handled knife he holds out to him.

His Omega trembles, throat rattling with a purr.

‘It’s my old hunting knife,’ Will replies, voice hoarse. ‘It… used to be my Dad’s… He made it… When I was a boy.’

‘Your father never wished for anything but your happiness,’ Hannibal assures him. ‘Just as *I* wish nothing but your happiness.’

‘You Cut me, stabbed me while I was *pregnant* and then tried to saw my skull open to eat my *brains!’* Will argues, even as Hannibal presses the bone-handle of the knife into his hand and encourages him to wrap his fingers tight around it.

‘Out of *love*,’ Hannibal says, so softly and simply that Will…

Accepts it.

‘Every family loves differently,’ Hannibal adds, and Will can tell from the height of his voice that he’s stood to the side, looking down at him. ‘Every love is unique.’ A pause. Will sits very quietly, barely daring to breathe for fearing of missing what comes next. What honeyed, poisonous words might slither from his Alpha’s lips. Then, ‘You deny your love for me because of what it might mean about you.’

Will shudders. A low whine catches in his throat, barely swallowed down before it can escape. Hannibal hushes him, soothes him with pheromones and purrs.

‘Can you smell me, Will?’ he asks, and, as Will nods, Hannibal loosens the knot securing the blindfold in place.

As it slips down, releasing him from the strange blindness-induced-paralysis, Will realizes he’s sat across from the black-skinned, white-eyed horned demon.

Hannibal’s true self. His monster. Starving. Insatiable. Malicious.

He whines again, a low sound of fear.

‘This is what I am, now,’ Hannibal says, strolling across the gap between them and standing beside his inner self. The wendigo tilts its gaunt head, glancing up at him, before fixing Will with that terrifying stare again. ‘This is all that’s left of me. This is what torture and death has reduced me to.’

Will feels himself shaking. Tears well in his eyes, brimming over and rolling down his grizzled cheeks – freezing in the bitter wind of the real world – and he aches with so much sorrow and regret that it feels like his heart is splitting in two.

'All that's left is honesty,' Hannibal says, shrugging. He returns to Will's side. Kneels down and gazes up, his own eyes wet. 'Can you be honest with me now, Will?'

Will wets his lips, tasting salt. He nods. Yes. Yes, he wants, more than anything, to be honest, now, with Hannibal.

With himself.

'You were as good to me as you knew how to be,' Will whispers, gazing sadly at the wendigo. 'Hunting with you, being Bonded to you… They were the best times I've ever had…'

'That could be a fine definition of love,' Hannibal suggests, though gently enough that Will knows he could ignore it, should he choose to. The Alpha shifts closer, taking hold of Will's cold hand in both of his own warm palms. 'Could you allow yourself to love me the way I love you?'

And Will looks down at the tanned hands around his own, at the burgundy eyes pleading with him from within a sharply defined face… He looks back at the monster in the chair…

Never before had he *ever* felt so alive. So loved and accepted for who he was. Not like his life now… No matter how much he *loves* Molly, how much he adores her…

He *misses* Hannibal so much it hurts and he feels hollow.

He pushes up from the chair. Sudden. Decisive. Strides across the gap between him and the wendigo and, with a vicious thrust, stabs it right in the chest. Right where it's heart should be.

Black blood pours out, thick as tar, and Will recoils from it. He knows, instinctively, that he doesn't want that to touch him. To infect him.

The wendigo reaches for him. Clutches his arm. Pulls him closer and leans *into* the attack, impaling itself on his knife. Will bares his teeth and drags the blade upwards, breaking the papery thin and releasing a flood of ash.

No! No, I don't want this!

Will rears back, recoiling from the wendigo. Hannibal, having stood, clamps his hands over each of his gasping Omega's temples, soothing the panic attack before it can take hold.

'Sssh, sssh, sssh,' he breathes. Then, 'Whatever you need from me is right here, in your head. I'm always with you, Will, no matter what, and subject to *your* judgment.' He purrs, a long, low Alphan sound, arms dropping to circle Will's waist and pressing against the tingling scar where he'd tried to cut their children from him. *'Never* be ashamed of who you are, Will.'

Alone in the dog park, Will opens his eyes.

Fuck. *Fuck*.

What the fuck is wrong with him?

***

Wrong.

Grandmother had always called him wrong.

Sitting at the end of the dining table, his legs dangling, Francis tries not to gain the negative attention of his Alphan grandmother.

The guests of the retirement home slurp their soup and gum at the soft foods Cook has prepared for them. They are Betas; Grandmother does not offer her home to other Alphas.

Francis struggles to eat because of his cleft palate. He dribbles, but Grandmother insists that he eat with them regardless. She says it builds strength of character.

As a grown man, Francis still sits in the same position at the table. He still eats with two forks, one in each fist, but he doesn't dribble as much anymore. The surgery has helped with that, as do the false teeth that he wears to support his jaw.

He thinks of the home videos he has begun to process again. It's nearing Thanksgiving, and families are lining up to send him their applications.

The Dragon is hungry. It needs more than mere food to survive.

It requires sacrifice.

The full moon is approaching, and he needs to be ready.

***

He can't sleep.

Will huffs and rolls onto his side, punching the stacked pillows beneath his head. He gives it a minute, but it's no use. After another toss and turn, he gives up and gets out of bed, pacing the thin carpet of the motel room.

He hasn't has insomnia this bad in six years. He knows he *needs* to sleep – he's meeting Jack at Quantico in the morning and then flying back out to the Jacobi's house – but all he can see, whenever he closes his eyes, burned into his retinas, are dead Omegas, dead children –

And *Hannibal.*

His mental connection to the Alpha feels terrifyingly real. Too close. Too fresh. Like golden threads of potential, stronger than anything else the world can throw at them. Stronger than distance, separation or even hatred.

And a part of him *does* hate Hannibal. But it's a very small part, quickly silenced and overwhelmed by the deeper, more complex emotions for his former Alpha.

Yearning. Twisted affection. Respect, fascination…

Love.

As much as he doesn't want to admit it, as much as he denies and fights against it, Will does still love Hannibal. It's not the same as his gentle love for Molly – his need for Hannibal is primal, visceral and all-consuming.

It's dangerous and wild, and makes him stupid. Reckless. He can't be like that with his children. He has a duty to raise them in a kind, stable environment. It doesn't matter that he'd thought that life would be with his Alpha. Hannibal ruined those dreams the moment he Cut the crest from his neck.

The moment he stabbed him in the belly and tried to murder their babies.

Growling to himself, angry at the spinning, useless thoughts, Will collects his iPad from the bedside table, swiping the screen awake. The Jacobi's lawyer has sent him files relating to the case – family videos, mostly – and he opens them now, mulling through the collection. If he cant sleep, he might as well work. Maybe he'll see something he missed before.

You have to see them living.

Hannibal's words tug at him, and Will settles on a clip of a birthday party. The world shifts, bringing with it the scents of cake frosting and melting wax candles, hot dogs and the rich, earthy tones of a Bonded pair.

They were so happy.

He remembers the twins' last birthday party. Pink, blue and purple balloons hanging above the table. Streamers and a pile of brightly-wrapped presents, waiting to be devoured.

Will watches them. He lives amongst them; a silent, smiling ghost.

And, as he does, he feels his dark beast stir inside. He feels its hunger, twisting and coiling like a serpent. Filling his veins. Making his jaw ache with the need to bite down. To mark.

He watches Ezra Jacobi. The golden-eyed Omega is a good parent. Attentive. Loving.

Soft. Delicate. Vulnerable.

He thinks of the attack. Of what the Tooth Fairy did to them.

Of how he violated Ezra, before and after he was dead.

I changed you. And then I made you mine.

***

Francis has a routine. He likes routines. He needs them. They help keep the swarming, screeching, scratching thoughts at bay.

They help keep the Dragon happy.

After dinner, he closes the heavy drapes over the windows in the downstairs parlor. Then, he sets up his screen and projector. After Grandmother had passed away, he had installed a La-Z-boy recliner in the parlor, and he sits in it now, wearing only his tight black boxers.

He turns out the lamps – in the darkness of the room, he might be anywhere. He has a light-machine that fills the room with varicolored dots of light, making him feel like he's on the floor of a spaceship, but he doesn't use it right now.

Now, with the next full moon due and the Dragon stirring, he wants to remember the glory of last time.

Remember… and make notes of where he made mistakes. He needs to be perfect; he needs to *always* be perfect for the Great Red Dragon.

His Alpha – the Alpha that he will *become*, once he has proven himself.

Thumbing the drop switch to start the projector, Francis watches the Leeds's family movie start; the dog bounds down from the armchair, running to the back door, greeting Mrs. Leeds and her children as they return from grocery shopping.

And then the film cuts to Francis in his attic room. He is standing nude before the print of *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun.* His eyes glow golden and his erection stands proud, glistening in the sharp light, angry-red where he works it further.

The focus blurs and he approaches the camera, his movements stylized. His face fills the frame, the picture quivering and suddenly sharpening to a close-up of his mouth. In the dark parlor, Francis shudders as he watches his own disfigured lip roll back from Grandmother's jagged Alphan teeth, his tongue sliding out, tasting the air like a snake. And then his mouth fills the screen, engulfing the lens and casting it into darkness.

And now, to the bowels.

Watching the next part, Francis feels a flash of shame at his own ineptitude. A bouncing, tilting blur becomes a bed. Mr Leeds is thrashing. Mrs. Leeds sits up, shielding her eyes. She turns to her mate and puts her hands on him before rolling towards the edge of the bed, legs tangled in the covers, trying to rise. The camera jerks toward the ceiling, molding whipping across the screen like a stave, and then the picture steadies. Mrs. Leeds is back down on the mattress, a dark spot spreading across her nightdress.

There's darkness again, the five beats and tic of a splice, and then the picture returns. It is steady; on a tripod. The Mr Leeds and his children are all dead. Arranged. Seated against the wall, mirrors in their eyes to watch.

Francis comes into the picture, his movements once again stylized – not unlike Japanese Noh *Mai* – and graceful as the Dragon takes control of his muscles.

As he *becomes* the Alpha. Strong. Powerful.

He is blood-smeared and naked, except for a pair of black goggles over his eyes and black latex gloves. He approaches Mrs. Leeds where she lies, suffering and dying, on the bed. He reaches for her nightdress and tears it from her, as dramatically as one might unveil a part of art.

Watching in the parlor of his grandmother's house, Francis pants with excitement. He isn't due another Heat but his body is flushed, his skin coated in a sheen of sweat. He runs his tongue over the scar on his upper lip, again and again, touching himself. He never touches inside; the Dragon would never allow it, and the towel he's placed underneath him soaks up the disgusting slick leaking from him.

Pleasure swirls, tightening like a spring, rising with every thrust into Mrs. Leeds. Every bite. Every bruise. He comes into his hand as the Dragon rears over her transformed body, claiming his prize, and Francis keens into his knuckles, biting down until he tastes blood.

The Dragon growls, long and low, in his ear. A high, piercing whine almost shattered his eardrums and Francis flinches, ducking low and cowering in the shelter of the Dragon's shadowy embrace.

'Alpha…'

His muffled plea slips out before he can stop himself, and Francis burns with shame. He expects a rebuke, a punishment.

What he feels, instead, is…

Heat.

Power.

Strength.

The muscles down his spine shift. Bones crack. He pitches forwards, working his jaw, needing something, *anything*, to alleviate the tension inside him.

I am the Alpha.

I am the Dragon.

As the film flickers through another round of images – the Dragon laying claim to his offering once again, sinking into the cooling flesh until his potent seed can push into her – Francis sees an enormous, red, scaled tail coil around his lower leg.

The Dragon is pleased.

Soon, he promises. After all, families are e-mailing their applications to him every day.

***

The next day, Will meets Jack, Zeller and Price at Quantico. Forensics have dug up the Jacobi's cat – a small, white thing in a shoebox.

Its name was Kate, Will thinks, keeping his distance from the table and the two white-clad Betas behind it. Jack stands at the head of the room, watching them.

'Found it behind the Jacobi's garage,' Zeller says, gesturing down to the dead pet. Flower between its paws, wrapped in a dishtowel. Strangled.'

'Son of a *bitch*,' Price whispers, shaking his head.

Zeller looks at him, dark eyebrows hiking up to his hairline.

'O-kay… Seems like you're more upset about the *cat* that you were about the *children…'* he points out, but Price just shrugs.

'I'm particularly fond of cats,' he explains, and Will remembers, with a surge of pain, that he adopted Beverly's cat after Hannibal murdered her. 'I'm not *particularly* fond of children.'

'What about the Leeds's dog?' Will asks and Zeller glances up at him, his expression softening.

'It was punctured in the abdomen,' he explains. 'The vet worked on him. He should be okay. They thought he was a shot but they couldn't find a bullet. Seems like he was stabbed with an icepick or an awl.'

'Son of a bitch,' Price repeats, shaking his head again.

Before Zeller can lay into his colleague for his animal-oriented concern, Will speaks his thoughts aloud.

'So, he feels compelled to hurt the victims' pets before he comes to kill the family?'

'It eliminates an early-warning system,' Jack adds, quietly. 'Case the place, kill the pet, then the family.'

Will nods, his mouth thinning into a grim line.

'We should send a private bullet to veterinarians and animal shelters, asking for an immediate report of animal mutilation.'

'Chicago and Buffalo are *four* states *apart*,' Jack says, his brow creased with confusion. '*Nothing's* been found to link these two families. *What* do they have in *common?'*

Will stares down at the dead cat. A dead pet that a child and a parent loved. A source of love and comfort.

His heart constricts and he feels his eyes fill with gold as a whine lodges itself in his throat, kept at bay only by a shake of the head and a sharp swallow.

Still, when he speaks, the only connection he can find so far, his voice is trembling and hoarse.

‘They were both *happy*.’

Jack growls, his eyes pulsing red.

‘Right, here’s what we do,’ he says, leaning forwards on braced arms. ‘Clerks can send the bulletins. I want *every* veterinarian, *every* animal shelter… Start with the eastern seaboard and work west. Will, you’re going to the Jacobi’s house today, aren’t you?’

‘My flight leaves in three hours,’ Will replies, but Jack shakes his head.

‘Make it one,’ he says. ‘I’ll drive you to the airport, now.’

‘I really don’t need –’ Will begins, but Jack is already ushering him out of the door. He recognizes the overbearing reaction for what it is – an Alpha’s need for aggressive action in the face of uncertainty.

Zeller and Price just shrug at him in apology before watching them leave. When Jack barks an order, everyone around him obeys.

Will hands over his visitor’s badge when they reach the front desk, and then waits for Jack to bring his SUV round. It’s only once they’re both belted and Jack is on the interstate away from Quantico that they speak again.

‘Do you have any other thoughts on this guy, Will?’

Will looks out of the window, watching pine trees thin and give way to fields.

‘No,’ he sighs. ‘I know the Jacobi’s family lawyer thought it was money-related, at first. A motive hidden behind a seemingly-random, insane attack.’

‘But you disagree,’ Jack checks. Will hums, nodding.

‘This isn’t about money,’ he murmurs, gaze still fixed out of the window. ‘It’s about… power. It’s about control.’

Jack sighs.

‘How did it go with Lecter?’ he asks. ‘Was he useful?’

Will swivels his head to frown at him. His heart pounds and the nape of his neck prickles.

Jack has no right, *no right*, to ask him about Hannibal.

Clamping his lips firmly shut, he allows the silence to fester until Jack surrenders with a defeated sigh.

‘Alright,’ he concedes. ‘Alright. Fine. That was crass of me.’

Yes, Will thinks, glowering at the passing scenery again. *It was.*

‘He… helped me think of a few angles,’ he says, giving Jack a scrap – but nothing more. ‘Mostly, he was just trying to mess with me.’

‘Did he ask about the kids?’ Jack asks, glancing across in time to see Will nod. He growls, squeezing the steering wheel until the leather creaks. ‘That sick of a bitch.’

He is their father, Will thinks, though he doesn’t give it voice. It feels like a betrayal to Molly, somehow.

‘He asked me if I’d Bonded again,’ he murmurs, the words slipping out before he can stop them. When Jack raises a sharp eyebrow at him, he regrets speaking.

‘Think he’s jealous?’ the Alpha asks, taking the next exit. ‘He hated sharing you when you two were… whatever it was in the beginning.’

Will knocks a rhythm on his thighs, eyes still fixed on the passing scenery.

‘I think he just wanted to know,’ he replies, sadness leeching the strength from his voice. He feels Jack look at him again but he ignores it.

They don’t speak again until they reach the airport.

‘Call me when you land,’ Jack says, winding the window down and calling out to Will as the Omega steps from the car. ‘And if you find anything at the house. Whatever time it is. If you have a stray thought, and idea, even a *hunch*; I wanna know.’

Will glances back at him, seeing the same desperate hunger in the Alpha’s face that used to drive him. The need to stop atrocities. Save lives.

He doesn’t have that same fire, anymore.

Now, he’s just numb.

He nods, collects his bag from the backseat and slips away into the crowd.

The sooner this is over, the better.

***

The Jacobis’ house is hyper-modern; all flat concrete and floor-to-ceiling windows. Will crunches through deep, powdery snow as he checks the outside of a property he knows intimately from family videos.

What were the yards like?

He doesn't know what he's looking for. He's just… looking. The fir trees to the rear of the property give good cover. Perfect for keeping out nosy neighbors… and for a killer to hide in, perhaps.

Somebody has been through here. Broken twigs and branches bent out of shape. If Will didn't know how to track animals, he might have missed it.

No doubt local law enforcement did.

There's an old stump in a little self-made clearing. As Will lowers himself onto it, he feels another thread pull him closer to the killer.

You sat here…

There's a branch directly in front of him, but it has been chopped back. The end is smooth. A neat cut.

Hunting knife.

Then, as his gaze slides from the evidence of interference, Will realizes there's something carved into the trunk of the old cedarwood.

A symbol. A vertical line interspersing a square.

He has no idea what it means, but he knows it's important. He knows the killer carved it there.

It's a signature. You were proud of your work.

'I sat here,' Will whispers, barely aware he's making sound, feeling the killer's presence coil around him like a snake and settle over his mind. The sensation of *otherness* presses him down like a weight until the poison takes hold. Then… oh, *then*…

He *is* the killer.

'And I watched them.'

He lingers in the feeling. The power. The potential. It's a heady feeling; waiting for the right moment to strike. Knowing that, when *he* chooses it, their lives will end.

Will remembers the same feeling from when he fought Randall Tier.

Adrenaline makes his heart beat faster. His senses sharpen and he can smell everything. The fresh pine of the trees. Woodsmoke from a nearby chimney.

The acrid tang of an unwelcome Alpha…

Will drags himself out of the haze that has fallen over him. He's no longer alone and he needs to have a clear head.

When he looks down, he notices one final detail that is jarringly out of place. The discarded pull tab of a soda can. There is no other trash around.

It's *his.*

Will fumbles in his pockets for a tissue or a baggy – anything he can use to collect the little piece of metal that might still have a trace print on it. Something, *anything* they can use to catch this monster.

Inside his left coat pocket is a roll of plastic baggies and a few pairs of gloves. He doesn't even remember putting them in there but he's grateful he did.

Old habits die hard.

Tugging the gloves on, he carefully collects the soda can tab and then seals the little bag. He'll take it to Jack as soon as he's done here.

As he steps out of the trees, the source of the acrid Alphan scent becomes apparent. Fiery red hair in tight curls, heeled boots even in the snow and an obnoxious orange check coat.

Freddie fucking Lounds.

The moment she spots Will, and the baggy he's holding, her eyes flash crimson.

'Now, are you just America clean or is that evidence?' she calls, smirking at the look of distaste that Will can feel twisting his mouth.

Ignoring Freddie doesn't work, but that doesn't mean Will has to engage with her either.

'You're trespassing, Freddie,' he says, taking deliberate, measured steps through the deep drifts at the edge of the lawn.

Freddie snorts and rolls her eyes.

'I was *trespassing* before the blood dried,' she points out, reminding Will just how *vile* she truly is. 'When did they call *you* in?'

Will shakes his head, his stomach roiling at how immoral she is, and heads for the garden gate and his rental car parked on the street beyond.

'I'm not talking to you.'

'We're co-conspirators, Will,' Freddie replies, turning but keeping her hands in her coat pockets and a safe distance from the volatile Omega. 'I *died* for you and your cause!'

'Yeah?' Will snarls, whipping around to face her, his eyes blazing gold. 'You didn't die *enough!'* At Freddie's arched eyebrow, something snaps inside him and a dam of shame and

anger spills out before he can stop himself. ‘You came into my hospital room while I was sedated, flipped back the covers and snapped a photo of my fucking cesarean scar!’

‘Covered your junk with a black box,’ Freddie reminds him, utterly unashamed of herself. Of the act of *violation* it had been, to have a strange Alpha in his room when he had been restrained with a Crest Brace and unable to move, unable to defend himself. ‘A *big* black box. You’re welcome.’

She could have found the twins. She could have taken pictures of my babies.

‘You called us “Murder Husbands”,’ Will snaps, the shadow inside him writhing, desperate to be unleashed so he can destroy her. ‘*After* he cut my Crest off.’

‘Well, you *did* run off to Europe together,’ Freddie replies. She makes an overt attempt to look at the nape of his neck and Will can feel the flush creeping up his cheeks even before she asks, slyly, ‘Did he bite you again?’

‘Fuck you, Freddie.’

‘How does the Tooth Fairy compare with Hannibal Lecter?’ Freddie asks, unfazed by the hatred directed at her. ‘I haven’t seen anything like this since The Massacre at Muskrat Farm.’ Another sly smile. ‘Funny thing about that massacre… not only did Dr Bloom *survive*, but she got *rich*. Lecter’s living the lap under her care… What kind of arrangement do you suppose *they* have?’

Will huffs and rolls his eyes. He can feel himself shaking and it has nothing to do with the cold.

‘A complicated arrangement.’

Freddie nods, taking that. Then, because she just doesn’t know when to stop,

‘Couldn’t be more complicated than *your* relationship with Hannibal.’ When Will presses his lips together, she adds, ‘You paid him a visit. Before you lie, know that I know you did.’

Fuck.

Everything in Will screams for him to bow his head, bare his neck and submit. To whine or whimper. Something to soothe. He can smell his scent changing; gone is the smoky anger, quickly replaced with sweet, soothing tones designed to placate an Alpha and encourage them to protect him.

He has to get out of here. Now.

‘Goodbye, Freddie.’

He turns and hurries again for the gate, pulled up short when Freddie, her voice richer as her own biology responds to Will’s, calls out the new headline for her article,

‘“Federal manhunters, stymied in their search for the Tooth Fairy, have turned to the most savage killer in captivity for help. “It takes one to catch one”, a federal officer told this reporter.”’

Oh, you fucking bitch, Will thinks, and he can’t help but growl at her over his shoulder.

It’s not only a throwback to the vile article she wrote about him years ago, when he’d helped Jack with the mushroom killer, but a cruel reference to the fact that, as an unbonded Omega, he is once again captive to Jack and the FBI as much as Hannibal is captive under Alana’s care.

‘“It takes one to catch one”?’ He turns around, glowering across the distance at her. ‘You’re referring to Hannibal Lecter or *me?’*

Freddie grins and shrugs.

‘I’ll let my readers decide.’ Then, ‘If you’re smart you’d use me. *All* psychopaths are narcissists, they *love* to read about themselves…’

Will clenches his jaw until his molars grind. Then, without another word, he walks away.

Fuck Freddie.

Fuck all of this.

***

Criminally Insane Omega. Unstable.

Francis brushes his finger over the upturned, placid face of Dr Lecter before sliding it across to the more feral-looking Omega.

Will Graham.

The title of the article reads: "INSANE FIEND CONSULTED IN MASS MURDERS BY LOVER HE TRIED TO KILL."

Lovers. Mates. Enemies.

Freddie Lounds’s words scratch and tear at him. Francis presses, hard, onto the page of the TattleCrime magazine. When he brings his finger back up, there is a dark smudge of ink on his skin.

Wetting his fingertip, Francis wipes the ink away on a tissue. It leaves a black smear that looks like blood in the moonlight.

He carefully cuts the article from the magazine and slips it into his pocket.

His lunch break is over. Time to go back to work.

***

He has to leave to his own territory to get what he needs for his next project. Gateway has a separate department for infra-red photography, utilizing the labs from the adjacent building to handle and store the chemicals. Since the 70's, the US Department of Energy has used infra-red to map heat conservation studies. The Department of Defense still uses it for reconnaissance, and Gateway is the largest supplier of film to them both.

Francis crosses the glass bridge connecting the two buildings and heads through the labyrinth of near-empty corridors until he reaches a door with a sign beside it that reads: "Infra-red Sensitive Materials in Use. NO Safelights. NO Smoking. NO Hot Beverages."

The light above the sign is red until Francis pushes the button. Once it turns green, he can push the door and enter the light-lock. The door behind closes and, once it does, the next one in front opens.

An airlock, but for light.

'Come on in,' a voice calls from the dark, and Francis's stomach twists.

Reba.

Reba McClane has always been particularly sensitive, for a Beta. Her colleagues tease that it's because she's blind – that her other senses have heightened to compensate – but Reba knows she's always been this way. Even before losing her sight.

Her mother had been Omega, and Reba had often wondered, growing up, how close to be Omega herself she truly was. She's strong-willed, of course, but the empathy and sensitivity to sounds and scents is unusual for the more typically "dulled" Betas.

It's all on a spectrum, of course. Any educated person agrees.

It's only the bigots who insist on a strict "caste" separation.

When she hears the doors swish open, permitting entry into her cool, dark workspace, she wonders who it could be.

A moment later, her mystery guest reveals himself in a low, gravelly voice.

'I'm… Francis Dolarhyde.'

Francis hopes he doesn't slur too much. Speaking in the dark is easier, but he's distracted with the scents of chemicals and the faint trace of Reba's perfume.

'The same "Mr D" who sends the rockets when the requisitions are wrong?' Reba teases, her back still to him, hands steadily working to affix a label to the most recent tub of chemicals.

Francis ducks his heads, feeling chastised.

'The very one,' he mumbles, wondering if everybody says the same.

If they all talk about him behind his back.

If they laugh.

‘Put your back against the door –’ Reba’s voice takes on a touch of a lecturer’s practiced tone; steel wrapped in velvet. ‘– come forward three steps until you feel the tile under your feet. There’ll be a stool on your right.’

Francis obeys her instructions, his head low and neck bared – all the Omegan weakness safely hidden in the darkness of the room – and hovers by the stool she mentioned. He’s closer to her now. He can see her gleaming mass of black curls. Hears the rustle of her plastic lab apron and the slosh of liquids as she works.

‘I’ll just put this stuff in the Black Hole,’ Reba adds, moving carefully to a large cabinet in the corner of the room. There comes the hiss of a vacuum seal breaking and then rubber seals closing again.

A moment later, the lights come on. Francis presses his knuckle under his nose, adopting a thoughtful expression.

He doesn’t need to worry. Reba turns towards him, smiling in an approximate direction, but her dark eyes are blank.

A white can sits propped in the corner.

Francis lowers his hand from his mouth and smiles.

His eyes glow golden. It’s as if… As if all the tension has just drained out of him. Usually, when he’s talking to someone, especially women, he feels warm, stinging spots on his skin. They move over hi, to wherever the women look. Even when they look away, he knows they still see his reflection, no matter how careful he is to avoid reflective surfaces.

Oh, yes. He knows the angles of reflection as a pool shark knows the banks.

‘I was gonna –’ he starts, but aborts the sentence. Chews on his tongue a moment before his eyes drop to the bowl of fruit on the counter. ‘Do you think… Could I have a plum?’ he asks, tentatively.

‘Sure.’ Reba lets out a little sound, almost as nervous as him. ‘They’re really good.’

She offers him the bowl, a little to his left, and Francis moves to accommodate.

He has a powerful urge not to embarrass her.

He wants… to *protect* her.

Mine.

‘I need to ask… a favor,’ he says, and the thickening of his voice now is from holding back a purr.

Reba smiles and it lights up her whole face.

Francis could look at her face forever.

‘In addition to the plum?’ she jokes, setting the little bowl back down beside her Thermos flask of soup.

‘In… addition to the plum,’ Francis apologizes. He stalks closer, his back bending, the Dragon surging within him. Reba is *theirs*... She will give them what they want. ‘I need some… infrared movie film. Hot. Sensitive up around… 1,000 nanometers.’

Reba grimaces.

‘Better off shooting digital,’ she replies, and Francis shakes his head before remembering she can’t see him.

‘Oh, I’m not a… fan of that format,’ he says.

A chuckle.

‘Nobody around here is.’

Francis takes a step back, crossing his arms across his chest and judging the distance between them.

The same distance between his camera tripod and Ezra Jacobi’s body.

Between his tripod and Mrs. Leeds’s body.

The new tape will be wonderful.

‘I’m shooting at maybe… eight feet,’ he says. Then, because it sounds a lot like surveillance, which will draw suspicion, he adds, ‘I want to, er… photograph the nocturnal animals at the zoo.’

‘The more sensitive the film, the *meaner* it is to handle,’ Reba warns. ‘Gotta get it in the coolers… Dry ice, all that. Do you plan to process it yourself?’

‘Uh-huh.’ Francis is thinking about Ezra Jacobi and Mrs. Leeds, now. The Dragon moves inside him, its tail coiling around his thigh.

‘Got to be total darkness,’ Reba says. ‘Can’t even wear infrared goggles. They’ll give off radiation and cloud the film.’ She hesitates, a blush staining her cheeks. ‘I’m… happy to do it for you… If you want.’ A self-deprecating laugh. ‘Privacy guaranteed.’

Francis smiles down at the floor.

No burning spots when she looks at him.

No reflective angles to worry about.

Privacy guaranteed.

He withdraws to the door of the light trap and, as the door clicks open, looks back over his shoulder.

‘Thank you for the offer,’ he murmurs. ‘And the plum.’

***

The temperatures drop to below zero once the sun sets. Francis has been finished for a while, but Reba works a later shift than him and the urge to keep her safe still hasn’t faded.

He sits in his van, the vents blowing warm air over his face, and watches as she sits at the bus stop.

The bus is late.

Again.

His feelings for Reba make him uneasy. They’re dangerous.

He’s dangerous.

But Reba makes him want to be… More.

He pulls the van up alongside the sidewalk, seeing the flicker of concern over his face before Reba carefully schools her expression back to neutrality.

He does the same thing.

Winding the window down, he speaks.

‘Miss McClane?’

‘Mr D.’ Reba sounds relieved that it’s him and Francis wonders, with the Dragon snarling its outrage, how many people have tried to harass her – a lone Beta woman, blind and *vulnerable* – before.

‘Can I give you a ride home?’ Francis asks, hoping it doesn’t sound like a plea.

Doesn’t sound *Omegan.*

Reba gets to her feet with a gentle smile. Everything about her is gentle, easy and unthreatening.

‘Thank you, but I take the bus all the time,’ she lies. Francis knows this is a lie because he remembers seeing her leave almost every day with Ralph Mandy, one of the Alpha technicians at Gateway.

He’s assuming they broke up because now Mandy is now giving another Beta woman a ride home in his sportscar.

And then Reba adds,

‘You don’t need to worry about me.’

And, of course, Francis *does* worry. He does.

Because she is *his*.

‘I’m not worried,’ he says, some of the Dragon’s strength deepening his voice to a growl. ‘Ride with me…’ He wonders what someone normal would say. ‘… For my pleasure.’

Reba smiles again. She steps down off the curb, reaches for the handle of the van, and climbs inside.

Mine.

***

They don’t speak much during the drive. Reba’s house isn’t far, but far enough that Francis knows the bus must be awkward.

Her house is small and neat. It’s in a quiet area, near the University, with enough of a drive that he can park the van off the street.

Reba reaches for him, her fingers closing over his forearm.

‘Come in,’ she says softly, smiling again. ‘I’ll give you a drink.’

Francis gets the impression it’s not an offer she makes to just anyone, but he could be wrong.

He tries not to look at the way the seatbelt presses between Reba’s breasts. The way her pulse thrums in her throat.

Reba unbuckles herself – not because she’s noticed him staring – and climbs down from the van. It’s high and she stumbles a little, but she’s righted herself by the time Francis makes it down from behind the steering wheel.

She heads inside without waiting for him to follow – assuming he *will* – and Francis… Francis just stares.

Other people’s homes are exotic. Frightening and exciting in equal measures. He’s only been in four houses his entire life. His Mama’s, his Grandmother’s, the Jacobi’s and the Leeds’s.

Taking a deep breath, hoping his scent isn’t too strong, Francis forces numb legs to move. He opens the porch door – it would be so easy to break into this house – and follows Reba’s scent to a neat kitchen-diner.

Inside her home, Reba is free. She moves effortlessly, leaving her cane folded on the counter, her coat shed so she’d just in her soft cashmere sweater and cardigan combo again.

Francis has to remind himself that she really is blind.

‘Gin and tonic?’ Reba offers, holding up a bottle of alcohol.

‘Er, tonic, will be fine,’ Francis replies. He has to drive, after all, and Omegas don’t have a high tolerance for alcohol.

‘Would you rather have a beer?’ Reba asks, and Francis shakes his head. Right. She can’t see it.

‘Tonic.’

A smile.

‘You don’t drink, do you?’

‘No.’

‘Would you like a slice of pie, then?’ Reba says, moving to the refrigerator and making a quick inventory with her hands. ‘Karo pecan; it’s dynamite.’

‘Okay.’

Reba spreads her fingers along the edge of the pie crust, careful as a lover, until its circumference tells her that her middle fingers are at nine and three o’clock. Then, touching her thumb-tips together, she brings them down to the surface of the pie to locate its center, which she marks with a toothpick.

Francis watches, entranced with the whole thing. He tries to make conversation as she works, so she doesn’t feel his stare.

His heart is pounding in his chest.

‘S-so… how long have you been at Gateway?’ his voice wobbling as the low kitchen light winks off the edge of the knife in Reba’s hands.

‘Three months,’ Reba replies, neatly slicing a generous piece of pie. ‘I trained newly-blind people for ten years after I finished school. This is my first job on the outside.’

‘Outside…?’ Francis hates the way his voice catches on the sibilant “s”. How it mushes and slurs. ‘Of what?’

‘The inside,’ Reba says, rolling her eyes at herself. ‘I was training people to live in the sighted world… Didn’t live in it myself.’ She put the pie on the plate and brought it around the counter. ‘Thought I’d get out… Knock around a little.’

Francis takes the plate when she offers it. They sit down together at the table, each with a tumbler before them. Francis has tonic in his, but he can smell the stiff measure of gin Reba has added to her own.

Maybe she's nervous.

Maybe she's nervous of *him*.

He eats the pie in three swallows, shoving the sticky filling in by the forkful. As he eats, Reba continues,

'I *wanted* to go into speech therapy for speech-and-hearing impaired children. I expect I'll go back to that… One of these days.'

Francis stills.

She knows.

Of course she knows. How could she not?

How could she not hear what a freak he is? Francis with his hare-lip. Francis with the roof of his mouth malformed and misshapen.

A freak of nature, his Grandmother had called him.

'Do you cook?' Reba asks, breaking the tense, heavy silence between them.

Francis sits back, his head bowed, face downturned. He knows she can't see him but it's instinctive. Hide his malformity. Hide the ugly truth.

'Uh-huh.'

'How about a coffee?' Reba asks, offering him a smile.

'Uh-huh.'

Reba sighs, her voice shaking.

'Let's talk about something for a minute,' she says, 'and… get it out of the way.' She waits a beat – enough for Francis to raise his head, though she can't know that he did – and then continues, 'You haven't said anything since I mentioned speech therapy. I understand you because you speak *very* well, and because I listen. People don't pay attention.' Another little sigh. It makes her chest rise. Makes her breasts swell. Francis feels sweat stick the collar of his shirt to the nape of his neck and it scratches. 'If you don't wanna talk, that's okay, but I hope that you do because you *can* and because I'm *interested* in what you have to say.'

Francis listens to the speech. It's clearly important to Reba.

'Huh… That's good,' he says softly, and takes a long drink of his tonic water.

The coating on his lips leaves a red smear on the rim of glass.

It looks a bit like blood.

Soon, the Dragon purrs, sending a shiver down Francis's spine.

He's distracted again when Reba sits forwards and clasps her hands on the table between them.

'Here's what a like, Francis,' she says, her voice kind but firm, carrying no taint of sympathy. 'I've felt no sympathy from you. I like that. Sympathy feels like *spit* on my cheek. And I don't *do* self-pity.' She reaches out, her hand hovering, palm open, fingers scant inches from his mouth. 'May I touch your face?' At his audible flinch, she pauses. 'I just wanna know if you're smiling or frowning. I wanna know whether to just…' A wry laugh. 'Shut up or not.'

How well would she get around with her fingers bitten off?

The thought comes before he can stop it. Once it forms, it's hard to resist. Even in his Beta-teeth, he could do it as easily as biting off breadsticks. If he braced his heels on the floor, his weight back on the couch, and locked both hands on her wrist, she could never pull away from him in time.

Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, maybe leave the thumb. For measuring pies.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Francis takes Reba's wrist between his thumb and forefinger, inspecting her skin. So many scars. Most of them small. Some old, some new. Cuts. Burns.

A lifetime of hardship.

He scents her, dragging the smell from her skin up into his nose to settle like a coating of sugar on his tongue.

Mine.

'Trust me,' he whispers, golden eyes boring into her glassy black ones. 'I'm smiling.'

He cannot let her touch him.

Not yet.

***

Jack is Not Pleased when he sees the article in TattleCrime magazine.

'YOU TALKED TO FREDDIE LOUNDS?!' he demands, yelling at Will down the phone before the Omega has even had a chance to say hello, and making Will *very* grateful for his decision to return directly to his motel instead of Quantico for the afternoon briefing.

'Not on *purpose*!' he snaps, pacing back and forth in front of the window, watching beyond the net curtain to the dying rays of the sun as it sets on the horizon. Orange light glints from the windows of the cars in the parking lot and refracts in unpleasant angles from meltwater puddles, sharp as scissor blades. 'She ambushed me at the Jacobi's house! What was I supposed to do?!'

'WALK AWAY!' Jack shouts. 'Don't say a goddamn word! ANYTHING but TALK to her!'

‘She made it up!’ Will replies, raising his own voice. ‘I didn’t say *anything* about the case or about Hannibal!’

‘Jesus, Will…’ Jack sighs down the phone. ‘Just… stay away from Freddie Lounds. I’m already getting enough shit as it is for bringing you in. I don’t need this kind of attention.’

‘Neither do I,’ Will reminds him, and Jack sighs again.

‘Linguistics ran the symbol you photographed,’ he says. ‘It’s a Chinese character. It appears on a Mahjong piece. It marks the Red Dragon.’

Will scrubs at the back of his head. His shoulders aching. He looks around at the dim, claustrophobic room. At the dingy beige walls, hardwearing carpet and brown-patterned bedcovers.

The nape of his neck throbs.

Once again, the urge to just go *home* is overwhelming.

‘Well, it’s a better name than “The Tooth Fairy”,’ he mutters. He fumbles, one-handedly, to pour himself a glass of whiskey.

He’s almost run out, and makes a note to visit the store before he settles down for the night.

‘I’ll keep you posted if we find anything else,’ Jack says, sounding as tired as Will feels. Exhaustion settles into his bones, weighing him down, and all he wants to do is curl up and sleep.

He just wants to be with his family.

I miss having my Alpha.

‘Yeah, I’ll check in tomorrow,’ he mutters, and hangs up before Jack can detect anything wrong in his voice.

Because there *is* something wrong.

Wrong with him.

Wrong with all of this.

Will heads out to fetch himself a pre-packaged sandwich and another bottle of bourbon from the local drugstore before it gets fully dark. The bread is dry, the fillings tasteless, but the alcohol helps to numb it all and he’s tipsy when he finally lies back on the bed to call home. He lies back, fully dressed on top of the comforter, and listens to the dial tone.

Molly answers on the third ring.

‘Hello, hotshot!’ She’s bright and warm, and Will allows a purr to slip free at the sound of her. ‘Doing some good?’

The question dampens his spirits again and he glances, guiltily, at the box of photographic evidence on the dresser.

Pictures of dead Omegas. Dead children. Staring eyes and broken mirrors. People I couldn't save.

'Nothing you'd notice,' he replies glumly. He wrenches his eyes back to the water-stained ceiling and blinks back frustrated tears with a sigh. 'I'm lonesome.'

'Hm, me too,' Molly says, and Will can hear her heart aching for him. He knows how much she wants to take his pain away.

How much she wants to protect him.

But she'll never be my Alpha. I had an Alpha and now he's gone. I'll never have another.

Then, in a playful tone, she adds,

'I'm feelin' Randy.'

Will laughs, his belly tightening. Heat flashes through him, settling like an iron on the back of his neck.

'Me too,' he admits, confused when Molly giggles.

'Randy's our new dog,' she explains, and Will joins in the laughter.

He loves her so much.

'Oh, hell,' he groans, utterly caught out with her trick.

'Randy's got *huge* balls!' Molly continues, and Will can imagine himself there with her, in their rustic cabin at Moosehead Lake.

Instead of the hard, unforgiving motel mattress, he sinks into the pillows and feather comforter of their bed. The scents of home – pine, motor oil, the twins, dogs and *Molly* wash over him – and he can feel her warmth where she sits beside him.

'Never mind about his balls,' he chuckles, but he doesn't really want her to stop.

He could listen to Molly talk all day.

'They almost drag on the ground,' Molly adds, fondness softening her tone. 'He has to retract them when he runs.'

Will laughs again, warm and comfortable and safe as he lies beside her in the master bedroom of their cabin.

Their home.

The twins are asleep down the hall. Wally, too, unless he's still up reading with a flashlight.

‘Can you retract *yours?’* Molly asks, and Will feels a twinge, just for a moment, because – joking tone or not – they never really talk about his Omegan biology.

Not if he can help it.

It’s… personal.

Private.

‘Erm…’ He rolls onto his side and opts for a metaphorical story. ‘I retracted them once when I was a kid. Had to clear a barbed-wire fence, carrying a stolen watermelon.’

Molly chuckles.

‘Criminal mind even at *that* age,’ she teases, but it’s exactly the wrong thing to say. Will has to fight to hold onto the pretense but, even in his mind, he rolls away from her.

Folds his arms across his chest, comforting himself because he has never felt more alone.

Hannibal and I were so deeply Bonded… Nobody will ever understand me the way he did…

And Molly… sweet Molly…

Has she been reading TattleCrime? Is that why she’s asked, or is she just imagining the worst because he’s been gone for days?

Gone for too long already.

Will feels their normal life, fragile as glass, cracking at the edges.

Ready to shatter to pieces, just like his mind.

A broken teacup.

‘I don’t have a criminal mind,’ he says quietly, unable to keep the hurt from his voice.

‘Of course you don’t,’ Molly agrees, immediate and contrite. She knows how much he hates it when people call him a criminal or a psychopath.

She knows how much he needs the distinction to make what he does okay. To make it so that he can sleep again at night.

Sighing, moving the conversation back to safer waters because the tension between them is unbearable – a smothering blanket of distance and misunderstanding – Will breaks his news to her.

‘We have a *new*, new dog.’

‘Newer than *Randy?’* Molly asks, grateful for the reprieve and latching onto it with enthusiasm.

Will looks over at the brown and white Spaniel bitch sitting on a pile of blankets near the heater in the corner of the room, blinking slowly at him.

‘Belonged to one of the families,’ he says softly, his heart heavy with grief for the dead Alpha, Omega and their children. ‘There was no one, er… left to claim her… So I claimed her.’

‘You’re a very sweet man,’ Molly says, low and earnest with a mix of pride and affection. ‘I *love* you and I *miss* you. And you’re doing the right thing.’ Another pause. Will hears Molly swallow, take a breath, and he wishes he could be there to comfort her. ‘It’s costing you too,’ the Beta continues, when she’s steadied her voice. ‘I know that. But I’m *here*… and I’ll *be* here whenever you come home.’

They both know it’s more than a physical promise.

She’ll be there to put him back together again.

She’ll pick up the pieces, just like before.

I just don’t know if I can do it again, Will thinks, the thought insidious and traitorous, sliding between his synapses before he can stop it. *There are only so many times a broken teacup can be put back together.*

‘Good night, Molly,’ he murmurs, leaving everything unspoken between them.

Leaving his fears prowling, unchecked, inside his skull.

‘Good night, sweet man,’ Molly replies, and they end the call.

Will lets his cell phone drop onto his belly, screen down over his cesarean scar, and closes his eyes.

My foundations are shifting sands… Hannibal was supposed to be my paddle.

Molly isn’t his paddle, but she has been his anchor for years. They have a great life together.

And then he saw Hannibal.

He tasted his scent again.

And now everything feels different.

You and I have begun to blur. I’m curious if either of us can survive separation.

Six years of separation. Six years of rebuilding himself, piece by piece, shard by shard, with Molly’s steady, unwavering love.

But all it takes is one look, one comment to tear it down.

You are family, Will.

Growling to himself, Will brushes tears from his cheeks and pours himself an unhealthily generous measure of whiskey from the new bottle. His hands are shaking so much that he spills dribbles of amber liquid over the edges of the glass but he doesn't hesitate to gulp back the spirit.

It burns on the way down, helping to clear his head from the intrusive, unwanted thoughts. The Spaniel bitch – Duchess – tilts her head and whines softly. She can sense his distress but she is scared of her new surroundings and still recovering from her wounds, so she stays where she is and just watches, cautiously, as Will drains his first glass and pours another.

By the time he's on his third, his head is swimming and he's clumsy when he undresses. Will leaves himself in just t-shirt and boxers, falling more than climbing into bed, and he pulls the covers up and over his head.

A nest, or as much of one as he'll allow himself.

Just like old times, he thinks, and lets fitful sleep claim him.

***

The scent of copper hangs thick in the air.

Blood drips from the body on the mattress, splashing where it lands in the puddle gathered on the bare floorboards beneath the bed.

His work is a thing of beauty. A magnificent transformation of flesh and bone into something more.

Something *powerful.*

Their cabin bedroom is soaked in crimson. It slashes the walls. Slices the ceiling. Slides down the windows until the shaft of moonlight takes on a pink hue.

Molly lies on her back, her white nightdress now red with blood. Deep bitemarks and scratches mar her skin. She has been defiled and changed.

Elevated into something *more.*

Pieces of mirror gleam where Will has placed them inside her mouth, slicing her lips to make room, and into her eye sockets. There is too much blood to soak into the mattress and it sits, gleaming wet, on top of the saturated surface.

As Will stares down, a heat haze shimmers and creates a golden glow around Molly's still form.

The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun.

Molly has transcended her insipid human form.

She is resplendent in death.

Will feels his hunger, finally sated. Strips of flesh dangle between his teeth. His tongue is coated in blood. His skin is slick with it.

He has feasted upon her and sated himself inside her, and he is one step closer to his true self because of it.

Throwing back his head, he feels his eyes blaze Alphan red as he opens his jaws wide to howl his triumph –

– and wakes with a start.

Hannibal.

He's drenched in sweat. His hair is plastered to his scalp with it. His t-shirt is stuck to his skin, rucked uncomfortably in his armpits. Beneath his pajama pants and boxers, his thighs are slippery with slick and more of it gushes from him as he scrambles up to sit against the headboard and snap on the lamp, needing the light to chase away the lingering remnants of the nightmare even as he aches with arousal.

Will can hear the desperate whimpers and mewls he's making, but he can't make himself stop. Across the room, Duchess whines her distress at him and thumps her tail in an attempt to comfort him, but it's not enough.

It's nowhere near enough.

He's burning up, his skin on fire and too tight across his bones. Pain slams across his skull, reaching down into his neck and hooking like claws into the scar at the top of his spine.

Right where my crest used to be.

Will curls on his side, clutching at his cramping abdomen. The ache is like a kick in the gut, like somebody reaching up inside and twisting, wrenching him open until he's hollow and empty. At the same time, his balls hang heavy and tender, and desire licks inside him until he's so hard a single stroke could make him come.

Heat, he thinks, dimly aware of the thick, sweet scent he's giving off. *The stress must have triggered a Heat.*

Shit. He needs a Neutralizer, *now*.

Will swings his legs off the edge of the bed, almost collapsing as the movement almost makes him orgasm. He bites the knuckles of his fist until he breaks the skin, choking back a scream.

He is *not* about to jerk off after dreaming about murdering Molly.

Another wave of desire has him shaking apart at the seams and gagging on bile. Will wrenches his t-shirt off, needing the course, damp material to be off and away from his hypersensitive skin, and manages to stagger into the adjacent bathroom.

Neutralizer. Where the fuck is the Neutralizer?

Under the yellow glow of the light, biting his lip to stifle the impulse to call out for his Alpha to come and mate with him, Will fumbles inside his washbag for the syringe of emergency medication he keeps in there.

‘Come on,’ he mutters, his vision swimming as he fights to uncap it. ‘Come on, come on, come *on.’*

Sliding his pajama pants down, he sticks himself with the needle and, with a full-body shudder, depresses the plunger.

Hannibal. I need you.

The thought comes swift and unbidden, followed almost immediately by the sensation of hands ghosting down his bare arms. They span his shoulders, rubbing and pressing, comforting even as Will presses himself into the corner of the room. The tiled walls are pleasantly cool against his overheated skin, and they muffle the whimpers still bubbling up despite his best efforts to stay quiet.

Will rolls his head back and forth against the beige ceramic, keeping his eyes firmly closed and drifting in darkness that still smells far too much like Heat hormones and tastes too much like Molly’s blood.

It had been so vivid.

So real.

You catch these killers because you think like them.

Is he putting his family at risk by hunting the Great Read Dragon?

‘He doesn’t like being called The Tooth Fairy,’ Will mutters, screwing his eyes shut until colors burst across the black. ‘He doesn’t like it… He carved his name into the tree… He was proud of his work… He *claimed* it. Marked his territory.’

The hands squeeze into his tense muscles. Lips brush against the shell of his ear and warm breath puffs across his cheek.

I’m here with you, Will. I’m right here with you.

Will moans softly. He can almost imagine Hannibal with him. The Alpha would wrap his larger body around him, pinning him into the wall and shielding him from the room.

He would keep him safe.

‘Hannibal,’ he whispers. A broken, pathetic thing. ‘Alpha.’

The medicine will work soon, Will. Just hold on.

Will grinds his forehead into the tile and surrenders to the imagined feel of the other man's embrace. He has no idea how long he stays like that; huddled in the corner, facing the wall with his palms flat to the tiles and nails digging into the grout, muttering to himself. It might be minutes; it might be hours.

Eventually, he feels the Neutralizer start to work.

His fever drops. The sweat beading on his skin begins to cool him down, enough that he shivers and his teeth start to chatter.

His thighs are still sticky with old slick, but he isn't producing it anymore, and his erection flags.

The feeling of hands touching him fades, and Will is left alone again.

He goes to the sink, eager to wash himself clean and crawl back into bed. In the aftermath of the trauma, exhaustion tugs on his limbs and drags at his eyelids. As Will looks at himself in the mirror, noting the bruises under his eyes and bright gold pupils, he feels his ever-tenuous grasp on reality falter,

The teacup fell and I shattered into a thousand tiny pieces.

His face cracks.

Like so many shards of a smashed mirror, Will feels himself fall apart. Madness coils around him, crushing him, and he's back in the hospital. He's just been Cut, just had everything he ever wanted sliced away.

Hannibal has left him. Killed Abigail, tried to kill the twins, and left him.

He's alone, and he's terrified.

It isn't supposed to be this way.

He doesn't remember making it back to the bed.

The sheets are damp and cold. Will spreads towels to soak up the sweat and slick. He pulls his cell phone close, hesitating over the options when he goes to make a call.

He could ring Molly. She'll be sleeping. He'll wake her.

He scrolls down and selects the Baltimore State Hospital. After three rings, the night nurse answers.

'I need to speak to Hannibal Lecter,' Will whispers. 'My name is Will Graham. It's an emergency.'

There's a pause. A clear consideration of his request.

And then,

‘I’ll connect your call. Stay on the line.’

Will curls back up on his side, his head on the untouched pillow and the dry half of the comforter wrapped around him. Thankfully, he’d kicked most of the covers off him during the nightmare.

There’s a rhythmic click on the line and Will finds his heartbeat slowing as he listens to the white noise. He could hang up; there’s nothing keeping him here, and this is a really, *really* bad idea, but he stays listening as one minute’s wait becomes two. Two becomes three.

He’s unprepared for the sudden connection. For the smooth, honeyed voice of the Alpha on the other end of the line.

‘Hello, Will.’

Will purrs.

‘Hannibal.’

‘I had a feeling you might call,’ Hannibal says, sounding pleased with himself. ‘Have the nightmares returned?’

‘You’d like that, wouldn’t you?’ Will replies, settling the phone between the pillow and his ear as he shifts and makes himself more comfortable.

‘I have always liked you when you’re afraid,’ Hannibal admits. ‘You work best when your mind is sharpened with fear.’

‘It’s my driving force,’ Will murmurs. ‘I dreamed I was the killer.’

‘“What we do in dreams, we also do when we are awake. We invent and fabricate the person with whom we associate”,’ Hannibal says. Then, ‘Who did you kill?’

Will rolls his eyes. They both already the know the answer.

‘I don’t even know why I called you,’ he says, and it’s so close to a grumble that pain lances through his chest.

I miss being with you.

‘Old habits die hard,’ Hannibal suggests, and Will hums his agreement. Then, as the silence stretches between them, the Alpha speaks again. ‘Perhaps you should seek out a therapist. Discuss what is troubling you.’

Will barks a dry laugh.

‘The er, the last *therapist* I had manipulated my hormones to drive me insane, and then tried to kill and eat me,’ he reminds him.

‘Whomsoever you choose to confide in will have a lot to live up to,’ Hannibal replies and, despite himself, Will feels a smile tug at his lips.

We are family.

‘I shouldn’t have called,’ he says, reaching for his watch and looking at the hands. Almost 2am. ‘It’s late. I need to sleep.’

Instead of responding, Hannibal purrs. The deep, Alphan sound slides from the phone straight into Will’s ear, enveloping him in a feeling of comfort and security. Will whines softly, tears pricking his eyes.

‘Shouldn’t *do* that,’ he mumbles, tiredness tugging irresistibly at him. ‘Not my Alpha anymore.’

‘Rest, *mylimasis*,’ Hannibal says, his voice a low rumble even as the phantom touch returns again to stroke a curl of hair back from the silver scar on Will’s forehead. ‘I will see you soon.’

***

Jack Crawford comes to visit him the next day.

No doubt the call Will made to him was recorded. Hannibal is under no delusions as to how much privacy he is granted within the confines of the institution. Alana may not have recording devices planted within his cell to eavesdrop on his visitations, but only telephone calls with his solicitor are unmonitored.

Hannibal has been expecting this visit, and he is waiting for him.

The other Alpha is dressed in smart black from head to toe – thick overcoat buttoned to the throat, leather gloves on his hands and boots buffed until they shine.

No doubt he hopes to make Hannibal feel shabby and inferior in his plain white jumpsuit and cotton gym shoes.

The mere thought makes Hannibal’s eyes gleam in the low light.

Poor Jack.

He still has no idea how little power he truly wields.

Jack moves with a distinctive Alphan swagger, his hands clasped before him and jaw set. He comes all the way up to the safety glass and peers in at Hannibal, who smirks at him from his position standing behind the table bolted to the floor in the center of the room.

Hannibal is a predator, and predators can only be caged for so long.

Jack would do well to remember that.

‘As I live and breathe,’ Hannibal says, his voice edged with disdain for the other man. ‘I thought I’d seen the last of *you*, Jack.’

The last thing he remembers is Jack Crawford hauling him upright from his knees in the snow outside Will’s farm house.

It’s over, Lecter. You’ll never see me, or Will, ever again.

‘Dr Lecter,’ Jack drawls, entirely too smug at seeing Hannibal behind bars.

Hannibal gives him a moment to bask. They were friends, once, after all. Then,

‘You’re dressing younger. Have you taken up some *sport* you enjoy with a new partner? Tennis, maybe?’

Gone are the three-piece suits and military haircut widening his jaw. Beneath the coat is a zip-up sweater. The pants are indigo denim.

These are the clothes of an Alpha regaining his youth and prime. Jack is dressing to impress once again.

Perhaps he is already Courting a new Omega.

The digs are easy. Low-hanging fruit, as Will once said.

It is so much fun to watch the muscle jump in Jack’s jaw. To see the flash of red in his eyes.

‘You’ve taken up your sport with an *old* partner,’ Jack replies, and it’s all Hannibal can do not to roll his eyes.

‘I wrote Will a note, warning him you’d come calling,’ he agrees.

‘Yes,’ Jack says. ‘I read your note before my office forwarded it to Will.’

Hannibal narrows his eyes.

‘To whet *his* appetite, or yours?’ He feels his anger surge inside, rising on a wave of darkness in the face of the Alpha who claims to care for the Omega. ‘You’ve placed him back in the pot,’ he continues, ‘and you’re letting him cook.’

‘We’re all in this stew together, Doctor,’ Jack replies, looking off to the side in a futile attempt to ease some of the tension in his shoulders.

Hannibal sneers.

‘It would be more *honest* if you ate his brains right out of his skull,’ he says, satisfied, at least, when Jack flinches at the reminder of the brutality.

‘And you’re *nothing* if not honest,’ the other Alpha growls.

Fuck this. Will called him last night, having woken from a night terror the likes of which he hasn't had in *years*. And, if Hannibal isn't mistaken, the Omega he was once Bonded to almost triggered a Heat.

Hannibal strides around the table, allowing a touch of anger to straighten his shoulders and lend a sense of power to his position when he faces Jack with arms at his sides.

He keeps his hands curled into loose fists. No need to show all his cards, after all.

'This shy boy has already seen Will,' he says. 'He already knows his name… Are you chumming the waters, Jack?'

What gives you the right?

'"It takes one to catch one",' Jack quips, and Hannibal has the sudden, irrational urge to reach through the airholes and grab him by the throat. Squeeze until something crunches and Jack's eyes roll back in his head.

He doesn't, of course.

He is a master of words.

'It takes *two* to catch one,' he replies, reminding Jack that Will was *his* first.

That Will continues to come back to him. No matter what.

Jack's eyes flicker red, and his smile is a tight, ugly thing.

'Will has never been more effective than he is with you inside his head,' he admits.

'I agree,' Hannibal says. 'But don't think you can persuade me to play along with appeals to my intellectual vanity.'

'I don't think I'll persuade you, Doctor,' Jack says, shaking his head. 'You'll either play or you won't.'

Hannibal considers this. He steps closer again, and is rewarded with Jack's whole frame tightening with resentment.

The other Alpha refuses to step back, but Hannibal can see the effort it costs Jack to stay standing where he is.

He can smell the *fear* lingering beneath his anger.

'Bella used to say your face was all scars,' he says, musing aloud as his dark gaze roves Jack's lined and weathered face. 'If you knew how to look.' He feels the coldness seep into his eyes, leeching the red from them and any trace of humanity along with it. 'There's always room for a few more.'

He thinks of his Omega, huddled in the corner of a shabby motel bathroom. Stabbing himself with an emergency shot of Neutralizer to abort a stress-induced Heat.

Calling him, in a desperate bid for comfort.

‘How much room does Will have, Jack?’

***

He remembers their last night in the townhouse together. Cutting bell peppers with Abigail. Wishing it had been his Omega, and not their adopted daughter, as his sous-chef.

He remembers the shrill ring of the telephone. Remembers wiping his hands on the white apron tight snug about his waist and picking it up from its cradle.

‘Hello?’

And then Will had spoken. His sweet, dark Will. His beloved Omega.

Risking his own freedom, using a tapped line for a warning that Hannibal would never use.

‘They know.’

I’ve betrayed you… but I’m still yours.

Hannibal hadn’t said anything. There was nothing *to* say, after all. Will had hung up, and Hannibal had lowered the phone from his ear.

He had turned to Abigail, then, speaking plainly and calmly.

‘They’re coming.’

The young Beta had immediately begun to fidget. Flooded with Adrenaline, her heart racing and sweat beading across her brow.

She still had so much to learn, then.

‘Are we going?’ she’d asked, taking half a step backwards in her eagerness to flee.

To run, like a deer before a hunter’s rifle.

‘We’re waiting for Will,’ Hannibal had said, setting the phone down.

He would *not* abandon his Omega.

He would have Will see the pain in his eyes before he set him free.

You betrayed me… but you still chose me, in the end.

Will would always choose him.

As he would always choose Will.

Will is the *pathos* to his *logos*.

‘It’s important that he sees you,’ he had said, enticing Abigail closer with his words. Drawing her into the snare and setting the wire, just so. ‘I want you two to be together.’

Free of me. Free of my darkness… You, forever. Him… for as long as he lives.

‘They’ll catch us if we stay,’ Abigail had hissed, her blue eyes bright with fear. She had spoken selfishly, without thinking.

Sloppy and misguided.

His own children would never be so rude.

Safe inside his Memory Palace, Hannibal watches as the scene shifts. In Abigail’s place stands Will, dressed for hunting in his khaki jacket, jeans and tough boots.

They are waiting for Jack.

A final meal before they flee.

A kill, to seal them together.

‘I’m on my honor to look after you, Will,’ Hannibal says, his soft voice barely heard above the patter of rain against the kitchen door and the rumble of distant thunder. He glances down at the knife in his hand, returning to dicing the bell peppers. ‘You have to look after me, too. We have to protect each other in these new lives we create.’

‘We have to protect our *children*,’ Will reminds him, his hand moving from the carrots he is slicing to rest on his belly. No swell yet, but their twins slumbering safely inside, nonetheless. ‘I won’t let *anyone* hurt them. Not even you.’

Hannibal closes his eyes, feeling wetness gather behind the lashes.

‘I want you to go upstairs and wait, Will,’ he says, the echoing words familiar on his tongue. When he looks again, Will’s blue eyes are ringed with gold and his lower lip trembles.

He worries for Hannibal. He hates to leave him alone.

‘For what?’ Will whispers, even as his shoulders begin to angle towards the door.

Obedient to a fault, his beloved Will.

‘You once told me that hunting with your father was the best time you’ve ever had,’ Hannibal says, feeling the comforting weight of the knife in his hand as his heart skips a beat and his scent thickens with the first hint of Rut. ‘Now, you’re going to hunt with me.’

Opening his eyes back to his cell, Hannibal thinks of Will’s phone call to him last night.

We're hunting together now… Will we kill together?

Denise is one of the nicer wardens in the hospital. She treats Hannibal with a respect born of fear, but respect, nonetheless.

When she enters the outer room of his cell, Hannibal is sure to remain very still. Denise is a Beta and she startles easily.

He doesn't want to ruin the excellent relationship they have.

She is one of the reasons he has so many pieces of paper and freshly sharpened pencils.

'It's your attorney,' the black woman says, shoving the receiver of the telephone through the metal slot in the edge of the safety glass wall.

'Thank you,' Hannibal replies.

Courtesy at all times.

Idly, Hannibal wonders if it is Will calling again.

He hopes so, but he knows it isn't.

He knows it is someone else, entirely.

Only once Denise has left does he approach the receiver. The Great Red Dragon will have gone to great lengths to contact him; he will not begrudge a few more minutes for Hannibal to ensure privacy.

And private this call will be.

Only the phone calls with his attorney are unmonitored.

His last remaining right as a prisoner.

But Byron Metcalfe has not called him in months, and he has no reason to call now.

Pulling the old black receiver from the metal tray, Hannibal ensures there is plenty of phone line before he holds it to his ear.

His belly is practically squirming with excitement.

'Hello?'

'Hello, Doctor Lecter.'

The voice on the other end of the line is distorted by disfigurement, but still easy to understand.

And it is most certainly not Mr Metcalfe.

‘I wanted to tell you… that I am… *delighted* you’ve taken an interest in me.’

The sibilant “s” is a problem. A cleft palate, poorly repaired.

‘I don’t believe… you would tell them who I am… even if you knew.’

The voice is halting. Hesitant.

Utterly unlike an Alpha.

‘The important thing… is what I am… *becoming*.’ A hitched breath. A sob. ‘I knew… you alone… would *understand* this…’

‘Tell me,’ Hannibal says, his voice slow and measured, the Alphan ring clear as he all-but purrs the words down the line to his most avid fan. ‘What are you becoming?’

And there’s the shift.

Gone is the timid Omega – for Hannibal is certain that is the body he currently occupies. In its place now is a beast: a creature of raw power and brute strength.

An Alpha in his prime, ready to Rut and fight and mate.

A monster, roused from the depths to ravage the world.

A low growl begins, rising in volume until it vibrates the receiver against Hannibal’s ear. The words, when the other man speaks, are a guttural, bloodthirsty snarl, and Hannibal’s flesh prickles with delight to hear such a challenge.

‘The Great. Red. *Dragon.’*

At last, he has a name.

And the Woman Clothed in Sun

Chapter Summary

Will takes Hannibal's advice and seeks out an old friend for therapy. Francis begins to Court Reba.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! I am genuinely shocked and appalled by myself that this has taken me six months to post an update. What have I been doing to fill such a vast expanse of time? Well, I moved house, finished my own novel and started shopping it around to agents (still a work in progress), and started the second instalment of the original novel series. So, yeah, busy, but not on Hannigram fic. A thousand apologies to you. I completely understand if you've all given up hope that this will ever be complete. I can only promise and reassure that it has not been abandoned (as you can see from this delayed but finally here update).

I hope you enjoy! xxx

TEN

And the Woman Clothed in Sun

It takes Francis a week to prepare for his call with Dr Lecter. It's a week that he should be using to prepare for his next offering to The Dragon, but this, he reasons, is equally as important.

This will help with his Becoming.

He is diligent with his speech exercises. A series of "Ruh", "Meh" and "Cuh" sounds that stress his throat to the point of hoarseness at work and bring him to tears most days.

No matter.

He will endure. He will perfect the sound so that he can speak to Dr Lecter.

The license plates for the van are easy to change. He has a whole bunch of false plates, and he is already familiar with changing them every time he hunts.

He considers putting New York plates on, but then switches them for Maryland ones before heading out. It feels appropriate.

The drive is long, and Francis has to stop for coffee and gas several times along the way. He slaps his cheeks and winds the window down so that the cold air will keep him awake, and chides himself for being so weak as to think longingly of the beds in the motels that he passes along the interstate.

Most people, he knows, would have flown, but Francis likes the solitude of the drive. The peace that it brings.

He likes to use the time to think. To plan.

When he arrives at Dr Lecter's old office building, he pulls on a jacket stamped with a white telephony company logo. One of the first things he learned when he was hunting for the Dragon was the invisibility of tradespeople. Janitors and servicemen are ignored – overlooked and allowed to go about their business undisturbed.

It is the perfect camouflage.

Entering the building from behind, Francis descends into the dank, dark basement and makes his way to the wall-mounted telephone junction box. His only source of light is the flashlight held first in his gloved hand and then, when he needs his fingers for the fiddly bit, in his mouth.

The plastic cover opens to reveal a jumbled tangle of wires and jacks. Moving quickly and confidently, Francis begins to unplug and re-plug the wires, switching relays in the telephony matrix. He adds his own wire to the connection; a secure line that will allow him to scramble the line and select the number that he wants to appear as the caller ID. A useful lesson, self-taught, that has come in handy several times over now.

Today is the most important call he will make with it. He needs everything to be perfect.

The wiring done, he heads upstairs.

Hannibal Lecter's office hasn't been touched since his arrest. It reminds Francis of a museum – a snapshot in time – with most of the heavy furniture draped plastic dustsheets or white drop cloths. There is a heaviness to the room; an unnatural stillness to the air that speaks of dust trapped behind sealed windows and doors.

A killer's room, closed off and ignored for over half a decade.

Francis whips the dust sheet off the desk and gazes down at the polished walnut surface. *He sat here,* he thinks, removing his gloves and tracing his fingertips in the air over the gleaming surface. *He wrote his notes and, sometimes, he even planned his kills here.*

Setting his laptop down, he boos up the phone system. His fingers move deftly over the keys and, when he picks up Dr Lecter's phone from its cradle on the desk, he hears a dial tone.

It worked.

Two rings. Three. A click as the line connects and then a man's voice.

'Baltimore State Hospital.'

Francis's heart leaps in his throat, but he forces himself to speak calmly. He's been practicing for this, after all.

'Hello,' he says, dropping his voice an octave. 'My name is Byron Metcalf. I'm Hannibal Lecter's lawyer.'

'One moment, please,' the man replies, and Francis swallows.

'I'll hold.'

And then there's silence. There's silence because it worked… *it worked* and he's about to speak to Dr Lecter. He's about to connect with the Alpha he so greatly admires.

Francis hears a low whine build in his throat and he wonders how gold his eyes are.

I wish they were red. They should be red.

They will be, soon. Once his transformation is complete. Once he becomes The Dragon.

The line clicks again and Francis's heart stops beating all together when he finally, *finally* hears the voice of the man he's been so desperate to speak to.

So desperate to connect with.

'Hello?' Dr Lecter sounds cheery, pleased to be speaking with someone outside of the Psychiatric Hospital staff.

Francis prays to the Dragon that he doesn't disappoint.

'Hello…' he says, his voice low and reverent. The appropriate level of awe when speaking to an Alpha of such stature. 'Dr Lecter.'

He blinks back tears and swallows a plaintive whine, wiping at his lips because he can't stutter now, he *can't!*

'As an avid fan,' he says, managing to get the words out without mushing them too much in his disfigured mouth, 'I wanted to tell you that I'm… *delighted* that you have taken an interest in me.' He takes a breath, steadying himself. 'I don't believe you would tell them who I am… even if you knew.'

Dr Lecter gives him space to say his piece and then, his voice tinny through the speaker, responds in the most perfect way possible.

'What particular body you currently occupy is trivial.'

Francis closes his eyes, relief washing through him.

‘I knew that you alone would *understand* this,’ he breathes. Excitement wells like a bubble inside his chest and he has to push through it to get the next words out. The crucial words. ‘The important thing is what I am *becoming.’*

‘Tell me,’ Dr Lecter says, his low Alphan purr slithering down Francis’s spine like the Red Dragon’s tail. His Alphan purr rattling through his chest like the beating of Dragon wings and scraping the nape of his neck like Dragon claws, until it burns hot. ‘What are you becoming?’

And then the sensation shifts. The Omegan feelings subside and, in their place, a great swell of strength and power rises within him.

His eyes must be glowing red now, Francis is certain. He holds the phone away from his face in both hands, working the muscles of his jaw as he stretches it and clenches his teeth, his canines aching where his Alphan fangs want to punch through.

‘The Great Red *Dragon,’* he rumbles, nothing human or Omegan about his voice.

Not anymore.

Something catches his eye and he glances up. He can see himself, a black-clad, virile young Alpha, sat in one of the leather armchairs across from Dr Lecter. The older Alpha is sleek and well-groomed, his long legs crossed at the knee and hands clasped in his lap as he listens intently to what Francis has to say.

‘I’ve admired you for years,’ Francis says, and though he speaks the words down the phone he *sees* his projection speak them. ‘And I have a complete collection of your… press notices. Actually, I think of them as… unfair reviews.’

Dr Lecter’s dark eyes never once leave his face. He is rapt and engaged. Something Francis has never had with anyone else.

Something Dr Lecter has been with anyone else, Francis is certain.

‘As unfair as yours?’ A pause as they both consider the newspapers and Tattle Crime magazine headlines. ‘They like to sling demeaning nicknames, don’t they?’

Hannibal the Cannibal.

‘“The Tooth Fairy”,’ Francis spits, glaring at the rug beneath his feet. “Fairy” is a derogatory term for Alphas that act like Omegas – who are lesser and therefore not worthy of their red-eyed caste.

It is an emasculating slur and he *despises* it.

‘What could be more inappropriate?’ Dr Lecter says, reassuring him that he, at least, doesn’t see him in such a way.

Nevertheless, Francis keeps his eyes lowered as he says,

‘It would shame me for you to see that… if I didn’t know that *you* have suffered the same distortions in the press.’

At the desk, Francis puts the phone on loudspeaker and hides his face in his hands, momentarily hiding the projections of himself and Dr Lecter in the armchairs. When he looks up again, he sees Dr Lecter’s thin lips quirk into a smile.

‘You’ve read Freddie Lounds’s latest.’

‘It’s not a good picture of you,’ Francis says. ‘Your likeness should be the dark portrait of a Renaissance prince.’

The Alpha purrs, just once, and the approval hangs like a drop of molten heat before shivering its way down Francis’s spine to spread out through his belly until he tingles. It gives him strength for the words that Dr Lecter speaks next.

‘Your speech is bent and pruned by disabilities, real and imagined, but… your words are startling.’

Francis gazes at him, enthralled. It is not dissimilar to how he feels when he gazes upon the painting of the Dragon in his attic bedroom.

‘I want… to be recognized by you,’ he whispers.

He imagines Dr Lecter nodding.

‘As John the Baptist recognized the one who came after.’

Francis rises from the desk and stalks closer to his imagined Dr Lecter. The other Alpha remains seated, waiting patiently as he prowls the space between them.

‘I want to sit before you, as the Dragon sat before 666 in Revelation,’ he says. ‘I have… *things*… I would love to show you.’ As he speaks, he moves behind the projection of Dr Lecter. Sat across from him still is his imagined self, focused and intent. ‘Someday, if circumstances permit, I would like to meet you. And watch you… *meld* with the strength of the Dragon.’

Raw, primal Alphan energy. You are worthy of his strength. Of his power.

Dr Lecter would complete him and make him whole.

‘See how magnificent you are,’ Dr Lecter says, and it’s as if he *knows* Francis is in his office, imagining their conversation just as he is.

They are already so attuned. So connected.

When Francis looks at his imaged self again, instead of seeing a human Alpha sat in the leather armchair across from Dr Lecter, he sees the enormous, red-winged Dragon from his William Blake painting. Sculpted muscles, rippling wings and a serpentine tail, he is the embodiment of Alpha power.

Of dominance.

Dr Lecter speaks again; soft and reverent in his ear as Francis basks in the heat of the Dragon's flames.

'"Did He who made the Lamb make thee?"'

***

Perhaps you should seek out a therapist. Discuss what is troubling you.

'Daddy?'

Will shakes his head, trying to banish Hannibal from his head and return to the conversation with Gracie. Danny is all solemn concern at her side and his daughter's golden brows draw into a frown so similar to Hannibal's that, for a moment, his former Alpha is all he can see.

'I'm here, sweetheart,' he says, offering her a crooked smile. 'I'm just tired.'

'Are you sad about Dad again?' Grace asks, tilting her head to the side and inspecting him carefully. 'Did he say something mean?'

The opposite, actually, Will thinks, his heart twisting behind his ribs at how much he still misses the Alpha.

It's been two days since he woke to the freak Heat flash and had to inject himself with Neutralizer. Two days since he dreamed about raping, killing and *eating* parts of Molly.

He hasn't been able to speak to her since that nightmare. He knows she's worried about him, but he just can't do it.

'No,' he whispers, coughing and covering the wobble in his voice with a gulp of lukewarm coffee. 'No, honey; he's not said anything mean. I'm not sad about him. I'm just missing you guys. I'm homesick.'

'We miss you, too,' Gracie says, and Danny signs that he hopes Will can come home soon.

'Yeah, bud, I'll come back just as soon as I can,' Will says, shards of glass in his throat. 'I want to be with you.'

'Are you lonely?' Gracie asks. 'Maybe you need a friend so you have somebody to talk to.'

Hannibal's words, echoed through their daughter's childhood innocence, makes Will's head spin again. He grips tight to the sticky vinyl counter of the motel diner and waits for reality to settle again.

It's just a coincidence. An uncanny coincidence.

'Yeah,' he manages. 'Yeah, maybe you're right.' He offers her a smile. 'Thanks, sweetheart.'

‘Love you, Daddy.’

‘I love you too, pumpkin.’

***

Dr Bedelia Du Maurier is in Chicago, giving a guest lecture on the clinical psychology of serial killer victims.

She’s also doing another book signing.

Ever since her miraculous escape from the evil clutches of Dr Hannibal “the cannibal” Lecter, she has been going from strength to strength. Her memoir, *Dining With The Devil,* hit the *New York Times* bestseller list and stayed there for six months. She’s practicing psychiatry again and is able to charge extortionate fees for her services.

Most of her clients are now A-list celebrities.

Oh, yes. Bedelia has done *very* well for herself.

Her backdrop for today’s lecture is an enormous Hieronymus Bosch mural. The people are painted in a variety of poses, each one expressing exquisite agony, and there are demons torturing them as they flail.

It is visceral and emotive – perfect for her lecture.

When Will arrives, Bedelia is almost finished. She has been talking for over an hour, and, if what he can hear is any indication, cleverly intertwining passages from her memoir with her discussion notes. The conclusion of her lecture, it seems, is less a self-reflection than a chance to remind everyone of her emotive writing skills.

‘I awoke in the fresh-smelling semi-dark,’ Bedelia says, her rich Alphan voice purring out through the densely packed but perfectly silent auditorium. ‘Knowing in some primal way that I was near the sea. Day and evening again, the smell of fresh flowers and the vague awareness of a needle bleeding into me.’

Bedelia moves away from the podium, giving the sentence space to breathe before continuing,

‘He never called me my name. That was strange at first, and then it wasn’t strange. And then my name was Lydia Fell.’

Her eyes flicker red when she spots Will. They both know that her industry, her fame – her *innocence* – is built on a lie, but she doesn’t falter.

More importantly, she doesn’t stop him from sitting down in one of the aisle seats near the back of the hall.

‘Deeply felt truths about myself as Bedelia Du Maurier were smoke and mirrors of the highest order.’ Her gaze doesn’t leave him once he has seated himself in her territory. Once

he has invaded her falsehood with his screaming truth.

But maybe it's more than that. Maybe there's sympathy in her gaze as Bedelia approaches him whilst still addressing the wider room.

'What we take for granted about our sense of self – everything we see, everything we *remember* –' She pauses beside him and places a gentle hand on his shoulder, looking down into his gold-ringed eyes. '– is nothing more than a construct of the mind.'

The teacup shattered. I broke into a thousand pieces.

Will understands all too well what she means. He likes to think that he remembers his own life. That he knows who he is.

But he doesn't. Not anymore.

He can't. Because Hannibal burned his mind with Heat hormones and then manipulated him into thinking he was a killer. He had him committed to a psychiatric hospital.

He took him out into that darkness, so far from the lights of his house, so far from any anchor, that, when he Cut his crest and severed their Bond, Will had nothing.

He *was* nothing.

Some days, he's not sure he ever survived that night in the kitchen. He's not sure if his life now is a dream or reality.

Bedelia didn't experience any of that… but it doesn't mean others haven't.

The blond Alpha waits for a few heartbeats, allowing the gravity of her sentence to resonate with her captive audience. Then, when she judges it right, she leaves Will's side and returns to her podium, speaking again as she does.

'Dante was the first to conceive of Hell as a planned space. An urban environment. Before Dante, we spoke not of the "gates" of Hell, but of the "mouth" of Hell.' She offers her listeners a small, regretful smile. 'My journey to damnation began when I was swallowed by the beast.'

The applause is immediate and enthusiastic. Will narrows his eyes behind the tinted lenses of his glasses, watching as Bedelia basks in the adoration like a cat in a ray of sun.

She isn't traumatized by what happened.

She's enjoying it.

He doesn't put his hands together for her, and he waits on the edges of the lecture hall for the sycophants to get their copies of her book signed before he steps forwards.

'Poor Dr Du Maurier,' he drawls, pushing off the railing and sauntering towards her as Bedelia studiously avoids looking at him and packs up her notes. 'Swallowed whole…

suffering inside Hannibal Lecter's bowels for what must have felt like eternity.'

He slides his hands into the pockets of his corduroy pants, prowling around the edges of her pool of light but staying just on the edge of the shadows, his darkness coiling inside his chest and whispering its pleasure when Bedelia watches him uneasily.

'You didn't *lose* yourself, Bedelia,' Will says, planting his feet and staring straight at her, cutting through all the bullshit she's layered around herself. 'You just crawled so far up his ass; you couldn't be bothered.'

Gone is the warm, confident woman from the lecture. The Bedelia that Will now sees is the one he knows; cold and arrogant, aloof in her distaste for him.

She sneers at him the same way she sneered at Hannibal, when she presented evidence against him in Court.

'Hello, Will.'

Will starts to move again, dark energy crackling through his veins. After Hannibal had suggested he find somebody to speak to – a therapist, no less – and then Gracie had said something so similar, there was really only one person he'd thought of.

She might be a compulsive liar and sociopathic in her manipulation of events to gain her fame and fortune, but she's survived Hannibal in both body and mind. I need her strength.

Maybe she can help him.

'You hitched your star to a man commonly known as a monster,' he muses, lifting his gaze to the paneled ceiling high above. It's a beautiful room set within a historic building.

I might add it to my collection inside my Memory Palace, he thinks, and there's an accompanying shiver because, for just a moment, he isn't sure if the thought is his or Hannibal's.

But how can it be Hannibal's?

Recovering, he turns back to her and flashes his teeth in a cold grin.

'You're the Bride of Frankenstein.'

'We've both been his bride,' Bedelia reminds him, though her tone softens as she says it. It's enough that Will feels comfortable to remove his glasses, pocketing them in his tweed blazer.

'How'd you manage to walk away unscarred, huh?' he asks, glancing up from under his lashes. 'I'm covered in scars.'

He tries to pose it as a casual question, but it's massively important and Bedelia clearly sees that. When she answers, it's with a seriousness – and a sympathy – that surprises Will.

'I wasn't myself,' the Alpha explains. 'You were. Even when you weren't… you were.'

Will frowns. Swallows. His heart skips a beat and he thinks he understands.

‘I wasn’t wearing adequate armor.’

‘No,’ Bedelia agrees. ‘You were naked.’ The blue of her irises warm with red. ‘Have you been to see him?’

Will feels, in that moment, very much like an Omega. He feels small and weak, and he feels very, very lost without his partner.

We were two halves of a whole.

‘… Yes.’

‘You haven’t learned your lesson, have you?’ Bedelia says sadly. ‘Or did you just miss him that much?’

Will feels his eyes sting and he knows how gold they must be. How raw the emotion showing through his face must be.

Yes.

He looks down. Tries to swallow but there’s something in his throat. When he goes to wet his lips, his tongue is dry.

He decides the question is rhetorical.

‘Have you been to see him?’ he rasps, looking at her again.

Bedelia shakes her head, an iciness creeping back into her eyes.

‘I’ve seen enough of him. I was with him behind the veil. *You* were always on the other side.’

The simplicity of that strikes Will. He’s known, logically, that he’s always fought against Hannibal’s darkness… that he’s always tried to temper the Alpha. But he’d thought he’d been at least partially behind the veil with him.

Bedelia gathers up her notes and her briefcase next to the podium. Just before she can walk away, Will catches her by the elbow.

‘Something we should talk about?’

Bedelia glances down at him and arches a golden eyebrow until he lets her go. When he does, blushing and releasing a flood of appeasing pheromones, the Alpha smirks and saunters away with a smug,

‘You’ll have to make an appointment.’

***

Feeling a quiet sense of power after his phone call with Dr Lecter, Francis decides to take Reba on a date. The idea comes to him when he's watching the local news and sees a story of a tiger having its tooth capped. Looking down the length of his torso, which is pumped up and reddened from pumping iron to near-exhaustion, he watches as the local news reporter babbles on about the procedure, whilst the zoo medics calmly work between the jaws of the tiger's terrible striped face, and thinks back to the blind Beta asking to touch his own.

He wants Reba to have one flash of his glory. To share with her, a little, in a way that she can survive.

I wish to Court her, the way an Alpha would Court an Omega.

So, riding the waves of his confidence, he phones the zoo director the very next morning and, in exchange for the rest of the expensive film reel – the director is ecstatic; apparently the bats are about to give birth and they'd love to record it – he secures a visit to pet the tiger with Reba on Saturday.

Then, it's just a case of telling her.

'Is it a picnic?' she teases, flashing her dimples and her white teeth as she smiles at him in her dark room at the processing plant.

'It's… a surprise,' Francis replies. He no longer fears the 's' sound. He is the Dragon. Then, 'You'll like it.'

He picks her up from her house at eleven that weekend and they drive in comfortable silence for a while. Despite the snow on the ground outside, Reba keeps her passenger window down a crack the whole way and enjoys the breeze on her face. When they take a turn and slow down, following a curving road with the occasional speed hump, strange and heavy odors tickle her nose.

'The zoo,' she says, hearing a faint elephant trumpet in the distance. 'Why are we at the zoo? It's cold for the zoo.'

'Did you ever… see a tiger?' Francis asks, and Reba feels a rush of gratitude that he *can* ask the question. That he doesn't shy away from it and pretend like she's been blind her whole life when she told him she wasn't.

'No.'

Francis hums, thinking about that. Okay… So this is gonna be a good surprise for her, then. A big surprise.

'They're working on its tooth,' he tells her, concentrating on his hands where they grip the wheel.

Alphas don't get nervous. They don't feel fear. They're strong. Always.

'They have to put him to… sleep.' He glances over at her again. 'If you want… you can touch him.'

You can touch his face, the way you couldn't touch mine.

He sees how much the gesture means to Reba. He sees her eyes glitter with tears and her lip trembles.

He can also see how nervous she is.

It gives him confidence. It reminds him that he *is* an Alpha. He *is* the Dragon.

'You wanna do it?' he whispers, grinning at her, and he sees her grin back. Then, for just a moment, she looks nervous again.

'Will there be a crowd? People watching?'

'No,' Francis promises, the Dragon inside him rumbling its protectiveness of her. He would never shame her like that. 'No audience. Just you, me and the zoo director. Vets will come in after we leave.'

'Then hell-fuzzy-yeah,' Reba breathes, and she giggles. 'This is a *fine* surprise, D.'

They park up near the back building used for surgery and Francis helps Reba out. She holds tight to his arm the whole way inside, and he only lets go to remove her coat and cane, setting them to one side. When he returns, he plants her back firmly against the breezeblock wall of the room so she knows her boundaries of the unfamiliar space.

His big hands linger on her arms, thumbs stroking her skin through the thin material of her blue blouse, and Reba aches with desire and excitement.

She's never met anyone like Francis Dolarhyde before.

The floor of the treatment room feels like linoleum under her feet. The air is cool, echoing in the large space. Radiant heat comes from the far side, as well as from Francis's larger body directly in front of her.

He shields her from the room, from the tiger, from any conceivable threat, until she's ready.

Just like an Alpha would… but I thought he was a Beta?

She's distracted from the thought, though, by the rich, heavy musk wafting over from the big cat.

'It's here,' she whispers, speaking aloud without meaning to. Her heart starts to pound. 'How do I know he's sound asleep?'

'Tickle him,' Francis jokes. 'If he growls, run for it.'

Reba huffs a laugh and it breaks a little of her tension. Enough that she can start to move. She braces herself.

‘Do you have a general impression?’ the zoo director asks, keeping a respectful distance as she approaches the table. ‘I can describe as much as you like…’

Reba hears the note of uncertainty in his voice. The hesitation that comes from someone well-meaning who doesn’t want to offend by overstepping.

D never makes her feel like such a burden.

‘I think I saw a puma, once,’ she tells him, knowing D can hear her, too. ‘When I was little. But the zoo at Red Deer where I grew up didn’t have a tiger.’

‘Okay.’ The zoo director breathes a sigh of relief to be given a clear steer from Reba. ‘Well, this tiger is like a super-puma. He has a deeper chest, a more massive head and a heavier frame, with more muscles. He’s a four-year-old male Bengal, about ten-feet from the nose to the tip of his tail and he weighs eight hundred and fifteen pounds. He’s lying on his right side under bright lights.’

‘I can feel the lights,’ Reba says, tilting her face to them.

‘Put your left hand on the edge of the table,’ the zoo director instructs, much more settled in his role guiding her now. ‘You can explore with your right. Take your time.’

Reba gulps, all her nerves rushing back up on her at once. Suddenly, she doesn’t want to be alone in this. It’s too much. Too big.

Eight hundred and fifteen pounds of muscle.

‘D?’ she calls, her voice wavering. ‘I’d like you to tell me what you see… If you don’t mind?’

Francis swallows back his own anxiety, determined not to let Reba down. He’s not a mewling Omega, after all.

‘He’s… striking,’ he says, moving to stand just behind her as he speaks. ‘Orange and black stripes. The orange is so bright… it’s almost *bleeding* into the air around him. It’s… radiant.’

Reba slides her fingers through the tiger’s pelt, disturbing the pattern and rasping against its skin with her short, practical nails. Her breathing falters as she does, her chest heaving under the thin fabric of her blouse, and Francis tips his head closer, wishing he could rumble with an Alphan purr to soothe her.

‘I’m right here with you,’ he promises, taking comfort in her visibly calming at the sound of his voice.

Reba feels the heat on the top of her head, making her scalp tingle. She can smell her own shampoo, D’s soap and aftershave, alcohol and disinfectant, all of it overload with the tiger’s heavy musk. She flattens her hand on the tiger’s thick coat and moves it gently again, feeling the fur slide across her palm, with and against the lay, feeling the hide slide over the wide ribs as the rise and fall with every slow, measured breath of the slumbering beast.

Francis watches it all from the shadows behind Reba's shoulder. He watches as she forgets herself, forgets to school her facial expressions and lapses into a state of unconscious being, so thoroughly immersed in touching and feeling that tears trickle, unchecked, from her eyes. The muscles in his back and shoulders quiver. A drop of sweat inches down between his pectorals. His chest constricts, sudden and sharp, when Reba's wandering hands trail over the tiger's furry testicles. She cups them and moves on, stroking the length of its tail before skimming back up to trace its round ear.

When she presses quivering fingers to its black gums, to its sharp and dangerous teeth, Francis has to clamp a hand over his own mouth because *that was how she wanted to touch him* and he had denied her. He stares, enraptured, as she touches the rough tongue and feels the hot breath stir the hair on her forearms. He wants to take her, there and then – slam her up against the wall, rip her clothes from her body and sink into her – but he also wants to cherish her. Wrap her in his arms and take her home with him forever.

In the end, after she rests her head against the side of the tiger to hear its heart – which beats like thunder in her skull – it is Reba who pulls D in for a hug. Flushed and elated, she snuggles close to him as they stand outside in the cold winter's air by the van, each of them huddled back down in their coats and their scarves.

'Thank you,' she says, feeling drunk off the adrenaline of the adventure. 'So much. If you don't mind, I would *dearly* love a martini.'

***

Once they are safely inside the house – Francis had left Reba by the van first so he could go ahead and check the house, feeling an odd sense of danger that he couldn't place, couldn't shake – Reba takes the lead making them drinks whilst Francis sets a Debussy record playing.

She flicks vermouth from her fingers into the glass, adding two and half ounces on top. Pricks two olives onto a stick, the grease leaving a sheen on her skin, and drops them into each glass before picking them up and turning in D's approximate direction.

'That was a very elegant gesture,' she says, smiling at the large, cool room. 'Eloquent, too.'

Francis straightens from the record player. Now that he has Reba in his home, in his grandmother's home, he feels a charge in the air. Like fluorescence in the sea, it limned movement. Reba is the first person he's ever voluntarily had in the house. The room now seems divided between her part and his.

'Maybe the most eloquent thing I ever heard of,' Reba adds, taking a few careful steps closer when D says nothing. She tracks her location by the sounds around her. The ticking of the old grandfather clock. The hum of a window air-conditioner. She senses the shift when Francis approaches her, and her skin tingles when their fingers brush as he accepts the drink. 'That tiger, this house…' She sighs. 'You're full of surprises, D.'

Francis lifts the glass to his lips. He can smell the alcohol before he even takes a sip. Omegas have to be careful with the stuff – they have a lower tolerance than Betas, and far lower than

Alphas, so he'll get drunk if he's not careful. He doesn't drink as a rule, so he needs to make this one last.

'I don't think anyone at Gateway knows you at all,' Reba continues, giving Francis pause. He feels his eyes flicker gold, and is glad she can't see him.

'Did you ask them?'

He's not sure what he'll do if she says yes. If he learns that she's betrayed him like that. Something dark and ugly curls in his chest, ready to explode at any moment, and it flares when Reba smiles around the rim of her crystal glass and shakes her head with a gentle,

'No.'

The Dragon is heavy against his back. Its strength blends with his own muscles, ready to crush her at any moment.

'Then how do you know nobody knows me?' he growls.

'Because they wonder about you,' Reba says simply. 'They wonder about everything.' She tips her head to the glass again. 'They find you very mysterious.'

Something hard in his throat makes breathing difficult. Francis tries to swallow it down, but it won't budge.

'Did they… tell you how I look?' he manages to ask, aiming for a light tone but falling far short.

Reba considers the question. Considers the heaviness of it and what it means to a man like him.

'I didn't ask them,' she says. 'But yes, they told me. Do you want to hear it? Don't ask if you don't.'

There's no reply and, just like that, Reba feels as if she's alone in the room. Worse than alone, in fact, because the space that Francis had been occupying just moments before now feels like a black hole – swallowing everything and emanating nothing.

But he's still there – she knows he can't have left the room because she would have heard him.

She takes a deep breath, and a drink, and steels herself.

'I think I'll tell you,' she says. 'They said you have a kind of… hard, clean neatness that they like. They say you're very sensitive about your face, and that you shouldn't be…' Fear crawls up to snatch her breath and she reaches for him, her pulse kicking up a notch when her hands touch nothing but air. 'Where the hell *are* you?'

She heads towards what she assumes to be a sofa – a soft object that dulls the sound of the musical notes bouncing off the wooden furniture of the room – and breathes a sigh of relief

when she catches a whiff of D's soap again.

'Ah, there you are.' She sits next to him, basking in the heat radiating from his body. Setting her glass down on the low coffee table just in front of them, she reaches for him in a slow and careful manner. Poor D is skittish as a spooked horse, flinching at her touch, but, oddly, every muscle relaxes when she reaches an arm over the back of his strong, broad neck.

Francis can't breathe. He can't think clearly. Reba didn't mean to stroke the nape of his neck, she can't have because she doesn't know what he is, but the touch melts his bones and has him submitting to her in an instant.

He's so hard it hurts, his heart battering against his ribs and sweat beading against his forehead. His irises must be glowing gold by now, and it takes every ounce of willpower not to whimper or mewl.

He's never had an erection before in the presence of a living woman.

I'm an Alpha, he thinks, desperate for it to get his body back under control. *I'm the Dragon – I don't have to be afraid.*

'Do you wanna know what I think?' Reba asks, squeezing D's bicep and shoulder muscles as she inhales the sweet – if slightly burned – musk of him. Beta noses aren't as sensitive as Alphas or Omegas, but she's close to him now and he's all wound up, so it's coming off him in waves. It's not quite right, but not altogether unpleasant, softening the longer she works him, and she slides the flat of her other palm up and over his face, ignoring his whimper of distress, and touches his mouth, his nose, his cheeks. D is smooth-shaven, soft-skinned and nothing like the other Beta men she's been with.

She could eat him up.

Francis surrenders to her, dipping his head and pressing his scarred lips to her soft ones in his very first kiss. He worries that she'll find the rough texture of his scars off-putting. Ugly. Disgusting. But Reba opens her mouth to him, welcomes him, and almost touches the back of his neck again when she strokes his neck and his shoulder – enjoying the sculpted roundness of his muscles.

'I think you're great,' she whispers, breathing the words into his mouth as he shudders and falls against her waiting body.

Francis is dizzy. Reba feels so good, so soft and light, her touch gentle and tender against him… She strokes her way over his broad chest, down to his stomach, his thighs…

When she unzips him, and takes him into her hot, wet mouth, he drops the glass of half-drunk martini as every other part of him goes numb. His universe narrows to that one act, that one touch, to Reba sucking him off because *nobody* has *ever* done that for him before and it's *so* good. It's so much better than his own hand, and so taboo – for a male Omega to receive oral sex from a partner like that.

Francis throws his head back, clenching his teeth until his jaw pops. The Dragon swells within him, eager to rip into Reba's body. It wants to wrap their big, Alphan hands around Reba's fragile neck and squeeze until the bones crunch –

But he can't. The women at work know they are dating. They wonder about him. The people at the zoo saw them leave together.

And he doesn't want to kill her. Not yet. Not like this.

He thinks, instead, of Mrs. Leeds. Of Ezra Jacobi. Of biting them and tearing into them. Of rutting into their cooling bodies even as Reba bobs her head up and down his length, sucking him deep into her throat and humming around him.

Francis comes with a strangled cry, pleasure barreling down on him like a freight train. Tears prick his eyelashes, but he refuses to let them fall.

Reba swallows everything he gives her, wiping her lips on the back of her head and hugging his big thigh again before she sits back up.

'I hope I didn't shock you,' she says, grinning playfully with her perfect white teeth.

Francis almost startles at the sound of her voice. A living, breathing woman; her heart still beating… It's incredible.

Reba puts a hand on his chest, feeling the thundering beat beneath her palm.

'You're not done already, are you?' she asks, and, just like that, Francis is lunging for her. He scoops her into his powerful arms, carrying her as if she weighs nothing. Reba gasps and then laughs against his neck, clinging to him – so odd for a body to help, and so much easier than carrying a limp one – as they move down the hall.

Francis can't take her upstairs – no, not upstairs. He chooses Grandmother's room at the end of the hall, with its musty sheets and old bedspread. Lays Reba out on the bed in front of him and crawls over her, planting a knee between her thighs until he feels the wet heat of her against his jeans.

'God, D,' Reba whispers, shuddering against him as she fumbles to pull her blouse up and over her head. 'I want you.'

Francis openly stares at Reba's breasts, at the swelling bosom cupped in black cotton and lace. Reba tosses her blouse to the floor off to the side of the bed and unclasps the bra at her back, revealing pert, dusky nipples.

'Touch me,' she pleads, reaching for his hand and bringing it to her chest. When Francis holds one of her breasts in his big palm, she arches into the embrace and releases a slow, shuddering breath of appreciation when he rolls her nipple between thumb and forefinger. 'Yeah, just like that.'

Francis sits back on his heels and removes his own top, uncaring where it ends up. He can feel the Dragon like fire against his back, pushing against his shoulders as he bows over

Reba's body again. They kiss, sharing breath and spit as they rock. Heat licks through his veins, filling him with power, and he pins her in the way he pinned Ezra Jacobi.

'No, no,' Reba moans, tossing her dark curls and arching against him. 'Let me come to you. Let me move with you, D, please.'

Francis frowns – it's so different with a living person – but he releases her arms and allows Reba to hug him close. They move together, shedding clothes and shoes and boots until their naked bodies slide against each other. Sweat makes their skin tacky but neither of them care. Reba hooks a leg up and over Francis's hip, opening herself for him, and his mind explodes when he slips two fingers inside and feels how she welcomes him.

'Yeah, D,' she gasps, kissing along his jawline, down his neck and back up until she grazes his chin. He won't let her kiss his lips – not his scarred mouth – but it's close enough and he feels so good. 'Like that.'

She talks a lot during sex. She knows what she likes and she tells him. When he crooks his fingers, rubbing against the sweet spot inside her, she moans and rolls her head back, baring the slender column of her throat.

'Oh, yeah… that's so good.' She grabs at his shoulders, pulling him down until he's nestled firmly between her strong thighs. 'In. I want you inside me. I wanna feel you. Do you have a condom?'

'Um…' Francis hesitates. A condom? He's never needed one before. Dead Omegas don't need condoms.

Reba chuckles.

'In my jeans pocket. Can you grab it?'

Francis is glad she can't see the shocked expression on his face. The blush reddening his cheeks. He reaches down and fumbles in Reba's jeans for the little foil packet, ripping it open and getting the slippery latex from inside.

He can't tell her he's never put a condom on before. How hard can it be?

He rolls it over his aching length, disgusted because the lubricant on the condom feels like the slick he makes during a Heat.

I'm an Alpha. This is how they fuck.

'I'm ready,' he mutters, lining himself up with Reba's hot body. He tries to remember how he did this with Mrs. Leeds and Ezra Jacobi, how it was when the Dragon took control and he was a true, Primal Alpha – all Rutting instincts and pure adrenaline.

But he doesn't want to hurt Reba. He doesn't want to just fuck into her and not have her enjoy it. And she isn't a limp body lying there passively waiting to be transformed. She's pulling at him, arching up so that her soft breasts rub against his pectorals, and digging her heels into the base of his spine as she encourages him to mount her.

He gasps when he slides inside. It's tight and wet, and so, *so* hot. So much hotter than a dead body. So much hotter than on his fingers. Reba is an inferno and she's melting him from the inside.

'Oh God, D… yeah, just there… yeah, like that…' Reba is an enthusiastic lover. She touches every part of D she's allowed – his broad shoulders, strong arms and rippling muscles, his clenching buttocks as he begins to piston in and out of her.

And it's good – he's *damn* good. He smells like smokey honey and sweet musk, a hint of burning but nothing too unpleasant for her Beta senses, and his sweat, when she nuzzles his neck and suckles at his skin, is salty and clean.

He whimpers when she kisses him there, so she does it again. When she wraps her arms around his neck, he almost collapses against her, his erection going from hard flesh to pure marble. He rocks his hips again and again, the angle wonderful, and Reba snakes one hand down between them to rub herself.

'Keep going,' she whispers, feeling Francis pause when he feels what she's doing. 'This just makes it even better for me.'

'Do you want me to…?' Francis offers, but Reba shakes her head because she knows what she's doing and she's close – she doesn't want to stop. She inhales another lungful of his shampoo and lets out a pleased shout when Francis loops an elbow under her knee and hoists her up, changing the angle for the better. Rubbing herself faster, she feels everything tighten, pleasure coiling like a spring inside her. She pulls D further inside her body, bringing him home, and then she's coming, she's peaking and it's so, *so* good because he's still pistoning in and out like a goddamn machine and it just *doesn't* stop –

'Ohh... that's so sweet, D,' she gasps, riding the shockwaves of her orgasm. 'So sweet… so sweet…'

Francis watches her the whole time, entranced by the furrow of concentration that suddenly melts away into a wide-eyed look of shocked bliss on Reba's perfect face. She seems to be really enjoying herself, bucking and shuddering beneath him, and then she bites her lip and seems to be trying to push him off, and he thinks he's done something wrong because he hasn't finished, he hasn't come again yet, but maybe he hurt her…

'Lemme ride you,' Reba says, encouraging D to let her up so they can switch positions. 'I'll show you the time of your life.'

'Okay,' Francis breathes, stunned that Reba still wants to keep going. He doesn't understand how it works – isn't she tired, doesn't she want to stop? – but she settles back on him, straddling his hips, and takes him back inside her with a happy hum.

When she starts to move again, tears build in Francis's eyes and he's relieved Reba can't see him. His irises must be glowing golden with the pressure he can feel there. Glowing as much as Reba herself is – bathed in golden light, robed in the sun…

Pleasure spikes inside him and he spills himself inside the condom, releasing, as he does, his very life; himself past all mortality. He sends his pain into her starry darkness, ringing harmonic distances away to peace and the promise of rest.

Reba is so pure. So perfect and wonderful.

I love her.

If he is the Great Red Dragon, then she is his Woman Clothed with the Sun.

***

They lie together afterwards and, in the dark and the silence, Reba falls asleep. But Francis cannot. He puts his hand on her naked chest, her arm, her hand, pressing her together gently to seal the way back. He feels fragile. Stunned. Shattered into a thousand small pieces, like Baroque pearls flying from a torn necklace, or teeth shattered from a fist to the jaw.

Time and time again, Francis leans over and rests his cheek against the pillow of her breasts, listening to her heart thudding beneath her onyx skin.

So odd… to hear a heartbeat.

He takes Reba's limp hand and nuzzles up into her palm. He scents her, sucking down the rich, salty brine of her sweat-soaked skin. She uses coconut in her hair. There's still a trace of Vermouth on her breath. Apple in her deodorant.

He purrs, an unconscious sound that rattles up from the base of his throat and is hanging in the still air between them before he can stop it.

Omegas only purr when they're happy.

Reba makes him happy.

Curling onto his side, ignoring the faint scent of his Alphan Grandmother wafting up from the old, unwashed sheets, he rests his head on Reba's shoulder and lets heavy eyes drift shut. He can rest now, just for a little while. Reba will be safe from the Dragon.

And he… he will be safe with her.

Images coalesce in the darkness of his mind. The night he'd first shot a pistol, aiming the bullet up at the full moon hanging like an oppressive orb above him… A great firework that he saw during his trip to Hong Kong, called "The Dragon Sows His Pearls."

The Dragon.

A low rumble and a puff of breath in his ear startles him awake. The Dragon slithers down his spine, sending cold dread through his veins until his blood turns to sludge. It is angry. Something has vexed it.

Reba.

Francis lurches upright, gasping for air too thin to breathe. He throws the sweaty covers back and tugs on his boxers, sidestepping the wrinkled condom as he hurries from the room.

The Dragon calls to him from upstairs. Demands his presence from his attic space… his territory. It is a low sound, a cross between a purr and a growl – visceral and thrilling – and Francis feels his eyes pulse gold again as he follows the sound. He doesn't want to; he hesitates before setting foot on the first step, but he obeys – the Dragon is his Alpha, his other half, he has to – and he ascends the main staircase and then up again, into the small room tucked away in the roof.

Where is Reba? Has she been wandering?

Has she found the Dragon, or did the Dragon find her?

He hears the growling purr again, louder this time. His tattoo shifts, the Dragon sliding under his skin as it manifests itself across his back. Mounting him. Owning him. Pushing him to his knees as it sinks its fangs into he nape of his neck –

Francis squeezes his eyes tightly shut and whimpers. The Dragon has never done this before. Never been so separate to him before.

Never rutted up against him before.

A high-pitched whine fills his ears, unpleasant and painful, and Francis claps both hands over them to try and block it out, even as pain rips down his spine, radiating from the Dragon's fangs in his neck.

Please, he thinks. *Please… I'll be good… I'll send her away and it'll be you and me. Just please make it stop… Alpha.*

The Dragon pauses. Francis feels the fangs retreat, followed by the long, slow swipe of a rough tongue.

Very good, it rumbles, the sound of its voice shaking Francis to the very core, and then it's gone as soon as it came. Appeased by his promise.

By his submission.

Francis is just a man again. Free to leave…

Free to send Reba away.

"Very good", it had said.

The Dragon had spoken to him.

Francis races back downstairs, his heart hammering and brow slick with sweat. He has to hurry – who knows when the Dragon will change its mind. When it might want to rip and tear and kill…

Reba is fully dressed and waiting for him in the lounge, sat on the couch with her cane folded and waiting in her hands. When she hears his heavy footfalls in the doorway, she turns her face towards him.

‘Good morning,’ she says softly, getting up and offering a half-smile. Francis, still reeling from the new Twoness of himself and the Dragon, barely has it in him to answer.

‘G-good morning,’ he manages, standing stock still as Reba approaches. He feels her wrap her arms around him, feels her lay her soft head on his chest, humming at the feel of him, and he thinks how easily she would tear.

‘I really had a terrific time, D,’ Reba says, unashamed by what they did. Not angry or sad or lonesome, just pleased by their intimacy.

Francis can only assume it’s because she hasn’t found anything bad inside the house, and because she can’t see his face, his private parts.

His eyes.

She can’t smell that he’s a filthy, pathetic Omega.

He doesn’t know how to respond to that. What does someone say to that?

‘Good.’ He’s still breathing heavily. His heart is racing. The Dragon might return at any moment. He needs to get some clothes on and get her out of here, right now. ‘Me too.’

Reba makes the hard decision for him.

‘But I need to go home now.’

‘Yes.’ Francis looks around, waiting for another rumble. Another growl. Another pair of fangs in the neck. ‘Good.’ He steps back and dips his head, speaking low as he adds, ‘I’ll take you now.’

And then she’ll be safe.

She’ll be safe… But she can never come back.

***

Hannibal is only permitted private phone calls with his lawyer. All other calls are screened and monitored. Recorded.

His conversation with Will… His chats with Dr Chilton.

But the Great Red Dragon uses the lawyer loophole and they are able to speak freely.

Now, Hannibal wishes to gather information for himself. He made the request for a phone call to his lawyer’s office three days ago. Alana, it seems, is not above petty manipulations.

Sitting on his narrow cot, his back propped against the pale wood of his cell, he glances up from his copy of *The Divine Comedy,* watching as Nurse Turner pushes a wheeled table containing the telephone kit to the glass wall.

'Go behind your worktable,' she orders, her voice ringing out too loud in the otherwise quiet room. She always speaks clearly for him, so she never has to repeat herself. Hannibal respects a woman, a Beta, who knows her own mind.

He obeys, walking calmly to the center of his cell and waiting with his hands clasped behind his back.

'If you approach the barrier before you hear the lock snap, I'll mace you in the face. Understand?' Denise says, her pulse slamming in her throat as she faces one of America's most infamous serial killers.

Hannibal smiles, keeping his own eyes dark in a gesture of appeasement and as a display of self-control and dominance.

'Yes, indeed.'

I'd take your heart from you. You're brave. Serve it with garlic, crispy potatoes and a red wine sauce.

Denise takes the phone and slides it into the hatch that dissects Hannibal's reinforced glass wall. The line clicks and hums, holding for a connection, and Hannibal uses the privacy of his hands behind his back to slide a piece of chewing gum down from the tiny slit in his uniform sleeve.

He's been hiding the gum there for weeks, since he stole it from the janitor when the sloppy man dropped it during his last cell clean. The metallic paper around the gum had given him the idea to use the phone to call out from the hospital, and now he had the opportunity.

It was all coming together perfectly.

'Thank you so much, Denise.'

Hannibal watches as the Beta Nurse leaves and then, when he is certain of his privacy, he crosses to the hatch and retrieves the phone.

A man's voice on the line – someone from the front desk of the hospital.

'Are you ready for your call?'

'Yes, please,' Hannibal says, and gets to work unscrewing the bottom of the phone as the line begins to ring. He folds the wrapped gum in half just as a man's recorded voice comes through from the other end.

'You've reached the offices of Byron Met–'

Slotting the gum into the phone sends it back to a dial tone, and Hannibal screws the mouthpiece back on as he waits for it to change from a continuous beep to a new dial tone. Then,

‘Operator.’

Hannibal’s pulse quickens and his irises prickle.

‘Operator, I don’t have the use of my hands. Could you please ring 667-JL5-0102?’

‘Of course,’ the Operator says. ‘Have a nice day.’

‘Thank you,’ Hannibal says, waiting patiently for the transfer. There’s a new ringing and then a woman answers. High-pitched. Soft.

An Omega.

Perfect.

‘Dr Frederick Chilton’s office.’

‘Is this Linda?’ Hannibal asks, knowing full-well that it isn’t.

‘Linda doesn’t come in on weekends,’ the temp says, and Hannibal smiles to himself.

‘Maybe you could help me,’ he replies. ‘If you don't mind.’ A pause. He adds a note of deep Alphan purr to his voice – a difficult technique to master but very useful when manipulating conversations. ‘This is Bob Greer at Blaine and Edwards Publishing. Dr Chilton asked me to send a copy of his book to someone, and Linda was supposed to give me the address and phone number, but she never did.’

‘She’ll be in on Monday…’

Already, the Omegan receptionist is sounding hesitant. She wants to help. She doesn’t want to turn him down.

Hannibal smirks. He’s got her like a fish on a hook.

‘I have to catch Federal Express in about five minutes… and I don’t want to bother Frederick at home.’ A smattering of guilt. Nothing too much. Not too much pressure, or she’ll bolt. And then tipping it, so the request seems reasonable. ‘It’s right there in his contacts.’ He turns a purr into a chuckle, encouraging her obedience. ‘I’ll dance at your wedding, if you’ll read it to me.’

‘I’m opening the file.’ The Omega sounds flustered, and Hannibal rolls his eyes at how easy it is to manipulate her.

Nothing like my Will. So strong and confident. That took everything I had, and I still couldn’t control him.

‘Be a darling and slide the cursor down to the letter G,’ he says, keeping his tone light because, stupid and gullible as Chilton’s temporary receptionist is, she is helping him find his beloved again. ‘Give it a click and I’ll be out of your hair.’

‘Alright,’ the temp says. ‘What’s the name?’

Hannibal glances at his reflection in the polished glass of the cell. His eyes pulse red, glowing like embers in the gloom of the dimly lit room.

I’m coming for you, mylimasis. One way or the other, you will be mine again.

‘Graham. Will Graham.’

***

Bedelia’s office is exactly what Will expects. Everything is sleek and expensive, just like the Alpha herself. Tasteful… purposeful… but cold.

Empty inside.

Just like I thought Hannibal was. But this emptiness is true. His emptiness is cultivated. The product of decades of repression.

‘I almost didn’t make the appointment,’ Will admits, removing his coat and draping it over the back of his chair before sitting down across from the blonde woman. Dr Du Maurier’s thin lips curve into an unpleasant, knowing smile, and her blue eyes glitter.

‘I almost didn’t accept,’ she replies, smoothing out her skirt. ‘Where you go, Hannibal Lecter inevitably follows. I left him behind when I abandoned him in Florence six years ago.’

Will hums, considering her answer.

‘Have you had *any* contact with him?’

‘He sends me greeting cards on Christian holidays and my birthday,’ Bedelia says, almost imperceptibly rolling her eyes. Then, ‘He always includes a recipe.’

A warning. And a promise.

Will sniffs, a smile lingering on his own mouth.

‘If he does end up eating you, Bedelia… you’d have it coming.’ He can’t think of a more self-deserving person, actually. The Alpha is selfish and spiteful, and a perfect match for Hannibal’s darker instincts.

Sitting across from him, in an emerald velvet dress, Bedelia remains poised and unflappable. Her eyes are as cold as her words when she says, softly,

‘I can’t blame him for doing what evolution has equipped him to do.’

Will scoffs.

‘If we just do what evolution *equipped* us to do, then murder and cannibalism are morally acceptable.’

‘They *are* acceptable,’ Bedelia replies, surprising him before she adds, snidely, ‘to murderers and cannibals… And you.’

Will’s eyes flicker gold, and he tilts his head down a fraction, locking his gaze with Bedelia.

‘And *you.’*

After all, the Alpha had no qualms with Hannibal killing people when she was with him in Florence – as long as it meant she was safe from harm.

Will’s relationship with Hannibal’s choices is… more complicated than that.

‘You lied, Bedelia,’ the Omega continues, a mirthless chuckle curving his lips. ‘You do that a *lot*. Why *do* you do that a lot?’

‘I obfuscate,’ Bedelia says, smirking at him as her blue eyes flash red. ‘Hannibal was never not my patient. Covert treatment suffers secrecy and disapproval.’

‘Covert because Hannibal was an uncooperative patient?’ Will asks, to which Bedelia shakes her head.

‘Covert because *I* was a cooperative psychiatrist. “Do no harm.”’

Will mulls over her answer.

‘And did you?’

Bedelia’s eyes flash red again.

‘I did… Technically.’

‘You dared to care,’ Will sneers, watching a shadow of grief flicker across Bedelia’s face.

‘Not the first time I’ve lost professional objectivity in a matter where Hannibal is concerned.’ She thinks of another Omega, similarly built to Will, with dark hair and haunted eyes, who had sat in the very same chair where Will now sits. Twelve years ago, Dr Lecter had referred Neal Frank to her after ending his owner doctor-patient relationship with the troubled Omega.

Unbonded, depressed and experiencing paranoia, the Omega had stated that Dr Lecter used nuchal manipulations on him and took over prescribing his Heat suppressants. The result was a rapid advancement of his Heat, coupled with a blackout.

‘You experienced a traumatic event that you now associate with Dr Lecter.’

‘I nearly choked on my own tongue – I cried for help – and he remained indifferent! No Alpha does that!’

Listening to Dr Du Maurier recount her memory of events with Neal, Will finds himself distantly curious how many other Omegas Dr Lecter has manipulated in this way. He wasn’t special to the Alpha when things started; he was a toy to be played with, something to be broken to see what happened… but their relationship changed along the way and Hannibal Bonded him where he’d never Bonded before.

Everyone else he’s ever done this to is dead. I’m still here, with my kids… My Heats hurt and I have trouble remembering who I am somedays, but I think this is still better than the alternative.

He speaks his thought aloud without meaning to.

‘How is one patient worthy of compassion and another not?’

He’s not sure if he’s referring to Hannibal or Bedelia – perhaps both. Bedelia has admitted that she struggled to feel sorry for Neal Frank, and yet she empathizes with Hannibal. She forgives him for killing and eating other people.

There’s something broken inside her, too.

‘I’m under no *illusions* how morally consistent my compassion has been,’ Bedelia says. Then, ‘How is one murderer worthy of compassion and not another?’

Why did I love Hannibal? Why did I continue to love him, even after everything he did? Why do I still love him?

‘All that time you were with Hannibal,’ Will says, his gaze distant as he thinks back to the fever-dreams of Florence. ‘Behind the veil… you’d already killed one patient. Did it ever occur to you to kill another?’

You could have saved so many lives. The curator of the Palazo Caponi… Roman Fell and his Omegas… Anthony Dimmond…

Bedelia sighs through her nose.

‘My relationship with Hannibal is not as *passionate* as yours.’ At Will’s golden-eyed glare, she smirks. ‘You were his Pair Bonded mate. I was simply his therapist. *You* are here visiting an old flame.’ She pauses, watching the way Will sits, coiled and tense, in the chair opposite her. Then, ‘Is your *wife* aware of how *intimately* you and Hannibal know each other?’

‘She knows he was my Alpha,’ Will bites, smelling his scent thicken as anger gets the better of him. He smells like sugar sprinkled over fire and Bedelia’s nostrils flare as she catches a taste of it.

‘You couldn’t save Hannibal,’ she says softly, cruelty etched into every line of her beautiful, cold and impassive face. ‘Do you think you can save this new one?’ At Will’s baleful glare,

she continues, ‘Your experience of Hannibal’s attention is so profoundly harmful… yet so *irresistible.* It undermines your ability to think rationally.’

‘I am thinking rationally,’ Will whispers, and it’s an echo of the same fateful words spoken by Neal. He’d been worked up, his hormones in a mess because of the nuchal manipulations and lack of suppressants to regulate his cycle, and Bedelia had felt an overwhelming urge to slam him down and pin him until he submitted.

Until he *stopped.*

Will was quiet in his seat, but there was a fire inside him that she wanted to smother. The same urge, just as strong more than a decade later.

‘You’re walking down the street,’ Bedelia says, pulling herself back to the present day, from memories of over-emotional Omegas and tongues and murder. ‘And you see a wounded bird in the grass. What’s your first thought?’

Will’s brow furrows and his scent softens.

‘It’s vulnerable,’ he says. ‘I want to help it.’

Bedelia nods.

‘My first thought is also that it’s vulnerable,’ she agrees. ‘And yet…’ Her eyes flood with red. ‘I want to crush it.’ She smells the fear from Will; the salty tang of dismay at her own apparent cruelty, and she almost laughs at how soft he is. How weak. ‘A primal rejection of weakness, which is every bit as natural as the nurturing instinct.’

Just not as popular.

‘Of course,’ she adds, tipping her head with her red eyes still locked onto the silent Omega, ‘I wouldn’t crush it. But my first thought is to do just that.’

‘Is that why you killed Neal Frank?’ Will asks, and Bedelia has to admire his cleverness. She thinks of Neal, of how hysterical he had been – how vulnerable – and nods.

‘I’m an Omega – I don’t have any free will! I act as though I do, but I don’t. The only reason that I’m here is because I’m being ordered to attend! I don’t want see you! You’re evil!’

He had begun to seize, then, choking as his throat closed up, and something in Bedelia had… snapped. She’d rushed to help, of course, even offering him her fist to bite down on so he wouldn’t tear a chunk of out of his own tongue. But somewhere in the struggle her instinct to crush the vulnerability had overtaken her trained desire to help and she had just –

Pushed.

Pushed her fist deeper into his throat. Strangled him. Snapped his neck.

Killed him.

Crushed the wounded bird.

It had felt incredible.

Smiling sideways at Will, Bedelia waits for his reaction. She's not surprised when he doesn't have an outward display of disgust or shock – he's seen worse, imagined worse, after all – and Hannibal is still far beyond anything she's capable of.

But Will is just watching her, quiet and composed. His opinion of her hasn't changed at all. He despised her then, he despises her just as much now.

'One thing I learned from Hannibal,' Bedelia adds, feeling the ghost of Neil's blood still slicking her hand. 'Is the alchemy of lies of and truths. It's how he convinced you you're a killer.'

Will narrows his eyes. He thinks of Garret Jacob Hobbs. Of Randall Tier.

'You're not convinced?'

Bedelia sneers at him.

'You're not a killer. You are capable of righteous violence because you are compassionate.'

Will frowns.

'How are *you* capable?'

Another sigh from the Alpha.

'Extreme acts of cruelty require… a high level of empathy.'

I obfuscate.

The answer makes Will think of Hannibal. It's probably designed to. Twists and turns, deceptions and distractions.

A glimmer of hope because, for all his sins, empathy means that Hannibal *can* feel what Will is feeling.

He could change.

'The next time you have an instinct to help someone,' Bedelia says, as if reading his thoughts; '… you might consider crushing them, instead. It might save you a great deal of trouble.'

Don't give him a second chance, Will.

***

'Asian Studies at Langley are still looking at the symbol you found at the Jacobi's house,' Jack says, as soon as Will phones him. 'They'll get back to me as soon as they have

something.'

'Anything else?' Will asks, removing his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose and rub at the headache forming behind his eyes. 'I wanna get a videocall in with the kids before my appointment.'

'You're going back to see Lecter.' It isn't a question, but Will hums an affirmative anyway. Bedelia's words echo in his mind, a constant reminder of why seeing the Alpha again is a bad idea, but he can't bring himself to walk away.

He needs him. His thoughts, his opinions, his ideas.

His scent.

'He's helping me with the case,' he says, taking a sip of his coffee to wash away the sour taste in his mouth. 'He's useful.'

'As long as that's all it is,' Jack grumbles, but he doesn't argue because he wants the Tooth Fairy caught as much as anyone, maybe more than most, and he's always been willing to do whatever it takes to get his quarry.

No matter how harmful.

Your experience of Hannibal's attention is so profoundly harmful, yet so irresistible. It undermines your ability to think rationally.

'I know what I'm doing,' Will says, wondering if Jack can hear the lie in his voice. 'It's just this case and then I'm done.'

I'm done and I'll go home. Back to Molly and the kids.

'Let me know what Lecter says,' are Jack's final words to him, before the Alpha rings off and leaves Will to his corner booth. A waitress stops by to refill his mug and Will orders a plate of fluffy scrambled eggs and wholegrain toast, hoping the food will settle his stomach. He feels nervous, almost queasy with it, and the caffeine is making him jittery.

It's just Hannibal. Another visit with Hannibal. He'll be in his cell; he can't get to me from inside the hospital. I've got nothing to worry about.

Still, his fingers tremble when he opens the videocall app on his iPad to call Wally and the twins. They've scheduled the time to make sure they're all free, and Daniel's face appears on Will's screen after just a moment.

'Hi, baby,' Will says, signing as well as speaking. 'It's so good to see you.'

Danny signs back and lets him know what Gracie, Wally and Molly are on their way with hot chocolates.

'That's awesome, bud,' Will says, showing him his own mug. 'You got extra marshmallows in yours?'

Daniel nods, accepting his green space-themed mug from Molly and slurping the drink noisily even as the blond Beta drops a kiss to the top of his dark curls. Will's heart lurches and he feels an ache of homesickness so strong it's painful.

He wants to hold his babies in his arms again. He wants to be in the cabin with them, surrounded by the scent of pinewood and beeswax, dogs and the faintly floral body lotion that Molly uses. He wants to cuddle up on their worn, comfy couch with Underbite curled on his lap and the twins nestled under each arm, Wally at his feet surrounded by the rest of the dogs as they all fall asleep watching cartoons.

He wants Molly's terrible beef bourguignon and her amazing pancakes. Wants to feed and walk his dogs, trudging through thigh-high snow that's fine as powder and clings in balls to Winston's legs.

'We miss you too, Dad,' Gracie says, sitting down next to Daniel at the dining table so that Will can see both of their faces.

She can always tell what he's feeling, even with hundreds of miles separating them.

'Randy's settling in well,' Molly says, scooching up behind them and smiling at Will through the screen. 'He's going in for the snip the day after tomorrow.'

'Poor guy,' Will jokes, but they both know he agrees with her on neutering. Who knows how many stray pups the dog sired whilst out in the wild? Better to get him done – it'll make rehoming it easier, if that's what they decide to do. 'You got enough money in the account to cover it? I can transfer some, if not.'

'We'll manage,' Molly says, which means things will be tight. Will resolves to shift across more of his savings allowance to Molly's account, to keep things comfortable for her. He can't do much, and the financial situation because of his Omegan caste makes things difficult, but Hannibal left him a sizeable chunk of money that was paid into his account upon the Alpha's incarceration.

Recompense for damages due, the Lecter Estate solicitors had stated.

'How's school going, Wal?' Will asks, turning to his adopted son. 'Any updates on the team?'

Wally launches into a long and detailed story about how his ice-hockey team are now vying with the neighboring elementary school for third place in the county tryouts, and Will tucks into his food as he listens. Gracie asks more questions, and they all sign as they speak so that Danny is included, which allows him to ask, rather cheekily, if the team is hoping to do better next year.

Will grins when Molly gives him a look over the heads of their now-squabbling brood.

'I didn't teach him sass,' he says, holding his hands up. 'He gets that from you!'

‘Oh, like you never sass me?!’ Molly teases, arching a golden eyebrow at him. ‘Mr Salty Cracker?’

‘I... am choosing to exercise my constitutional right to invoke the Fifth Amendment on that one,’ Will replies, grinning over the rim of his mug. The hands on his watch-face catch his eye and his smile drops a fraction. Molly sees it, of course she does, a frisson of tension running down her spine that has her sitting up a little bit straighter and stops the kids’ bickering.

‘What time’s your appointment?’ Molly asks, forcing a light tone to her voice that Will knows she doesn’t feel. She’s worried for him, he can tell.

Is your wife aware of how intimately you and Hannibal know each other?

Bedelia’s poisonous words, slithering around his skull again. Will tries to shrug the guilt away, but it feels like a rock across the back of his shoulders.

‘Er, three,’ he says. ‘I’m just down the road, but I’ve got to get through security and everything, so…’

‘You’ll be saying goodbye soon,’ Molly finishes, managing not to sound bitter about him ringing off to go and see his former mate. ‘In *which* case, we need to tell *you* all about the moose that we saw down by the lake the other day.’

Will chuckles as Grace, Daniel and Walter launch into a tale of truly epic proportions, and he props his chin up on his hand, an elbow on the table as he gazes at the screen.

He could listen to his family talk forever.

Too soon, however, it’s time for him to leave for the hospital.

‘We love you, Dad,’ Gracie says. ‘We’ll see you soon.’

‘Soon as I can get this done, kiddo,’ Will promises. He locks eyes with Molly and blows her a kiss. ‘Love you all.’

‘Talk to you later, sweet man,’ Molly says, a teasing edge to her voice that makes Will think of dimly bedrooms and steamy thoughts passed between cellphones.

‘I’ll call you when I can,’ he says, and ends the video call before he can change his mind.

Before the urge to hop on the next plane back to Maine becomes overwhelming.

The next time you have an instinct to help someone, you might consider crushing them, instead. It might save you a great deal of trouble.

***

This time, when Will enters the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, passing through Security and following the orderly up to Hannibal’s floor, he has the strangest

sensation that he is descending through the bowels of Hell to meet the Devil himself. Bedelia's lecture comes back to him and he imagines himself trapped inside the very wood carving that he needs to speak to the Alpha about; trapped forever in looping passageways that always lead him back to the cold, dark eyes of his former mate.

We couldn't leave without you.

'Hello, Will,' Hannibal says, greeting him pleasantly from behind the security glass of his cell. 'How are you feeling, today?'

'Fine,' Will snaps, knowing the shadows under his eyes bely his lack of sleep. He huffs and rolls his shoulders, the thick collar of his cotton shirt scratching uncomfortably at the nape of his neck. He's angry with Hannibal because he fears him. Fears what he can still do to him.

How he can still make him feel.

'Of course you are,' Hannibal replies, brisk and casual, unfazed by the waspish tone. 'And what do you have for me today? More dead faces?'

Will slides the manilla folder through the hatch and watches as Hannibal approaches the glass to open it. The Alpha considers the photograph of the symbol carved into the tree trunk for a moment, and Will gives him silence to absorb before he says,

'It was done carefully and cleanly with a very sharp knife. It was not the work of a child.' He feels shadows gather around him – the lights are turned down low in the cell this afternoon, leaving his face and most of Hannibal's in darkness.

Only their eyes gleam, almost radiant in the black.

'It's a Chinese character,' Hannibal says, drawing upon his vast wealth of knowledge. 'Which means, "you hit it". An expression sometimes used in gambling.'

Will frowns, drawing closer to the glass. He can smell Hannibal's thick, rich Alphan musk rising from the circular airholes between them, and his navel prickles where he realizes, with how close he's standing, that the other man could reach through and grab him if he wanted to.

'A lucky sign?' he muses, moving away before the tingle on his skin could turn into burning heat. His palms are already clammy and it feels as if the radiators are on too high in the building. 'The character also appears on a mah-jong tile. It marks the red dragon.'

'"And behold a Great Red Dragon,"' Hannibal says, his deep voice ringing out in the space between them. 'Are you familiar with William Blake's "The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in Sun"?' he asks, humming as Will shakes his head. Then, 'Blake's Dragon stands over a pleading woman – an Omega – caught in the coil of its tail. Few images in Western art radiate such a unique and… *nightmarish* charge of demonic, *Alphan* sexuality.'

Will nods, accepting this. Adding it to what he already knows of the killer.

'The man who killed the Jacobis and the Leedses… saw something in them that drew him and drove him to do it. He *chose* them… because something in *them* spoke to *him*.'

Just as you chose me. Because something in me spoke to you.

‘The Jacobis were the first to help him,’ Hannibal replies, coolly dismissal of so many dead. ‘The first to lift him into the glory of his becoming. The Jacobis were better than anything he knew.’

‘Until the Leedses,’ Will adds.

‘As the Dragon grows in strength and glory, there are families to come,’ Hannibal says.

No.

Will takes a deep, steadying breath, but his voice still wobbles when he speaks. He can smell his scent, sharp with distress, and see the gold in his eyes where the reflection of his pale face stares back at him from the Plexi-glass.

‘I have to believe there is a common factor… and we will find it. Soon.’

‘Otherwise you have to enter more houses and see what the Dragon has left for you.’ Hannibal holds himself very still, his scent dulled. Will has no idea how he feels about that. How he feels about anything.

He hates it.

I was with him behind the veil. You were always on the other side.

A part of Will – the deepest, darkest part of him – longs to be behind the veil with the Alpha. To truly see and be seen.

But he can’t.

He’s always held back.

‘Eleven days until the next full moon,’ Hannibal adds, drawing Will’s gaze back up to his shadowed face. ‘Tick. Tock.’ A smirk, the briefest flash of red eyes as his lips curve upwards. ‘I like this Dragon, Will. I don’t think he’s crazy at *all*. I think he might be quite sane.’

He moves back to the tray, depositing the image back inside for Will to take and, as he approaches the plastic wall separating them, Will sees his reflection where Hannibal stands.

Two faces, two bodies, converging into one being.

Conjoined.

‘I can’t sleep,’ he whispers. ‘Not without drinking. I don’t want to see anymore dead children.’

‘Not when our own are waiting for you at home,’ Hannibal agrees, his hand lingering on the tray. Will mimics the stance and, for a moment, has the irrational – stupid – urge to push his hand up through the airhole so he can touch the Alpha again.

I've missed you.

'Do you phone your wife?' Hannibal asks, a cruel tilt to his head as he considers the man before him. 'At night, before bed. Does the sound of her voice help you sleep?'

'It was a mistake, calling you,' Will replies, frowning at him. 'A repetition of bad habits.'

'It set a precedent,' Hannibal says, his rich musk wafting through the holes to envelop Will. 'We've been proceeding on the plank of mood – cutting up a few old touches, as it were.'

'You haven't asked about them much,' Will says, feeling his pulse throb in his fingertips. 'Not since the first visit.'

'You indicated they were off-topic,' Hannibal replies, shrugging one shoulder inside the pale prison jumpsuit. 'I'm interested, of course I am. But I respect your decision, Will. I trust you as a father.'

'They've been asking about you,' Will admits, wondering why he was still talking about the twins when he *had* insisted they be off-limits to the Alpha. 'They worry for me… coming to see you.'

'That's smart.' Hannibal smiles. 'Tell me, Will – what do they look like?'

'Gracie's got light hair, real straight… Danny's is more like mine.' Will takes a breath, feeling sweat trickle down his spine. 'They have your cheekbones… your brow… my eyes… well, Danny's are dark, like yours, but…' He huffs and pulls out his cellphone, swiping until he can show Hannibal the image he has on his background.

The purr that rattles up from Hannibal's throat is deep and loud, sending waves of heat chasing chills up and down Will's back. It is the visceral sound of a proud Alpha and he preens inside to know that he – that his offspring, carried inside him and birthed into the world – caused it.

'They're beautiful,' Hannibal rumbles, gazing at the image on the screen. When Will returns the phone to his pocket, he looks back up at the Omega's face. 'It's a magnificent thing, isn't it?' he says softly. 'To be a parent… to create life…' Then, 'The Dragon is magnificent, too. Don't you want to see the world through his red haze?'

No. No, no, no, no, no.

A rumble from behind. The cold scrape of claws down his back. Will feels his reality start to shake, the edges tearing and burning up like paper tossed in the fire. He wrenches himself backwards, flailing for an anchor. For a paddle. For something, *anything* on which to moor himself in reality.

There's nothing.

'If remarks are passed that are unpleasant in the instant, you will see that context can make them something between roll and riotously funny. If things are said that are painfully true, then it is only passing truth and will change.' Hannibal's words slide through the air vents

and curl around Will as he collapses to the floor, gasping for breath that doesn't come, dizzy with the force of his panic. 'And, if you feel pain bloom inside you, *mylimasis*, it will soon blossom into relief.'

Will grabs for his head, tugging on his curls to ground himself in the pain of pulled hair. He's stuck in the past – in the townhouse with the ripping agony of his sliced abdomen, the cramping of his nicked womb and the mind-shattering torture of his severed crest –

'It might help to be sick,' Hannibal offers, his tone oddly cheerful. 'Get all those bad feelings out.'

'Fuck you,' Will growls, glaring up at him with wet eyes. 'Stay the fuck away from me.'

The Alpha spreads his hands, gesturing to the wall of plexiglass between them.

'"A robin redbreast in a cage puts all Heaven in a rage."'. Then, *'You're* the one who keeps coming to *me*, Will. Perhaps think about *why.'*

Will staggers to his feet, shaking from head to toe, and all but runs from the room. Hannibal's cold laughter chases him all the way to the men's restroom and bounces around his skull as he empties his stomach into the toilet bowl of one of the cubicles.

You're the one who keeps coming to me.

Before he boards his flight back to the motel, he books an appointment to visit the Brooklyn Museum of Art. He's going to hunt a Dragon.

***

Francis pays his cab fare in front of an apartment building on Eastern Parkway two blocks from the Brooklyn Museum. He walks the rest of the way, overtaken by early morning joggers headed for Prospect Park.

Standing on the traffic island near the IRT subway station, he gets a good view of the Greek Revival building. He's never seen the Brooklyn Museum before, though he's read its guidebook – he'd ordered it when he'd first seen the tiny letters beneath the photograph of *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* in the Time magazine.

The names of the great thinkers, from Confucius to Demosthenes, are carved in stone above the entrance. It is an imposing building, with botanical gardens beside it, and a fitting house for the Dragon.

The subway rumbles beneath the street, tingling the soles of his feet. Stale air puffs from the gratings, mixing with the smell of cheap street food from the nearby vending cart.

The museum is closed to the general public on Tuesdays, but academics are admitted. It's an excellent facility for serious scholarship – the staff members are knowledgeable and accommodating; they often allow researchers to come by appointment on Tuesdays to see items not on public display.

The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun hasn't been on display since its trip to the Tate Modern in London. Since its return, it has been sheltered in the dark to protect the fragile watercolor from fading in the light.

Francis carries with him a few scholarly items; a notebook, a Tate Modern catalogue and a biography of William Blake.

He also has a flat 9mm pistol, a leather sap and his razor-edged filleting knife under his shirt.

He'd called Reba from a payphone before getting into the taxi. Asked if he could see her tonight when he got back. She's working, but had asked if they could talk.

He hopes he can see her again soon.

Francis squeezes his eyes shut, hoping they aren't glowing golden, and crosses the street.

He enters through the main doors – only one of them is open – and clocks the armed security guard in the lobby. He's already scoped out the place – he came a few days ago and walked the entire ground floor so he knows where all the security points and exits are. He can run fast and shed his tie, smart coat and shirt to reveal a jogger's outfit underneath.

He can get away when he's done.

'Sign the register, please.' The man behind the front desk calls him forwards and Francis nods, taking a breath to steady his nerves. He's offered a pen, but removes his own from the inside pocket of his coat, unwilling to leave fingerprints on any of the items.

He's practiced his speech. There are a lot of 's' sounds, but he thinks he can manage.

'Painting study; Miss Harper.'

He signs the register as "John Crane" and pockets the pen again. The guard behind the front desk dials an upstairs extension and Francis waits. He can sense the Dragon inside the walls, waiting for him.

Soon.

It's less than three minutes before a middle-aged woman with a neat brown bob approaches from the public elevator.

'Mr Crane?' she calls, extending a hand to shake. 'I'm Paula Harper. You called about the Blake watercolor.'

Francis manages to shake with her – she has a firm, confident grip and she looks him in the face. Part of him wants to shrink away from her, but he can respect her neatness and sensibility.

'Come with me and I'll show it to you,' Miss Harper says, holding out a blue visitors badge. 'You'll need this.'

Francis eyes it warily, but accepts. When he clips the laminate to his lapel, he tries to only touch the edges.

‘May I ask what you’re researching?’ the Beta enquires, leading him towards the elevators again.

‘A paper,’ Francis replies, wishing he could get by on smiles and nods instead of conversation. ‘On Butts.’

He hates the mushy sound his broken mouth makes.

Ugly child. Stupid, ugly, broken thing. Nobody will ever love you.

‘On Thomas Butts?’ Francis nods and hums his confirmation, and Miss Harper continues, ‘You only see him in footnotes as a patron of Blake’s.’ They step inside the elevator and Francis’s pulse quickens. ‘Is he interesting?’

His eyes gleam in the low light.

‘I’m just beginning.’

The elevator takes them to the fifth floor. He’s tingling, but he has blood in his arms and legs.

Soon.

They go through double doors into the Painting Study and Storage Department. Francis looks around quickly. It’s a long and peaceful room, well-lit and filled with racks of draped paintings and archive boxes of stored masterpieces.

There’s no one but him and Miss Paula Harper.

She takes him to a counter-high worktable and leaves him there whilst she fetches the painting. Whilst she’s gone, he slips on a pair of black latex gloves.

She doesn’t notice when she returns.

‘We have to keep it in this box because light will fade it –’ she explains, setting the black box in front of him.

Francis stares, unable to comprehend what he’s seeing. It’s a flat case, no bigger than a briefcase. The Dragon is in there.

How does she have the strength to carry the picture?

He’s never thought of it as flat. He’s seen the dimensions in the catalogues, of course, but he’s never paid attention to them. He’s always expected it to be immense.

It’s small.

It’s small and it’s *here* in a quiet room.

He never realized how much strength the Dragon drew from the old house in the orchard.

‘– that’s why it’s not on display often.’

Miss Harper is still talking. Why is she still talking? Can’t she tell that the Dragon wants Francis all to himself?

‘You understand you’re not allowed to *touch* it. I’ll display it for you. That’s the rule. Okay?’

Francis nods. He can’t speak. Can’t take his eyes off the case.

Any second now.

Paula Harper opens the folder and removes the covering plastic sheet and mat. And –

There it is. *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun.* The Man-Dragon rampant over the prostate, pleading Omegan woman.

‘Isn’t it stunning?’ Paula breathes, gazing down as well. ‘Even the best reproductions can’t possibly do the colors justice.’

Francis stares, his heart racing. Sweat beads across his brow and heat settles like an iron on the nape of his neck.

Something wet oozes out between his ass-cheeks to dampen his boxers.

Never seen a child as dirty as you.

He sees it all in an instant. Blake’s handwriting on the borders, two brown spots at the right edge of the paper. It seizes him hard. It’s too much… the colors are so much stronger.

Look. Look at the Omega wrapped in the Dragon’s tail. Look.

Her hair isn’t like Reba’s, but there’s something about her face that looks the same.

He’s twenty feet from the door.

He holds in the voices bouncing around his skull.

I hope I didn’t shock you.

‘It appears he used chalk as well as –’

Francis hits her with the sap over the back of the head, knocking her unconscious. He eases her down to the floor and then drags her limp body between the rolling stacks, hiding her from view.

When he returns, he is focused.

He removes the gloves, shoving them in his pocket out. He needs to touch with his bare hands.

The paper is old. Fragile. There are textures he didn't expect on it. Layers to the artwork he could never have imagined.

And the Dragon… oh… the Dragon is glorious.

But small.

Francis feels his tongue push against the teeth inside his mouth. His gums ache where the ill-fitting dentures rub.

He lowers his face to the artwork and inhales, long and slow. Chalk, yes. Watercolor and dust. A myriad other scents clinging to the old paper. The hundreds of people who have touched the Dragon over the centuries, all the way back to Blake himself, who imbued the image with so much energy.

I am the Dragon, now.

With a low growl, Francis parts his lips and tears the first chunk out of the paper. He barely chews, just enough to get it down, and then grandmother's teeth rip another piece off.

On and on he goes, consuming the Dragon, feasting on its rippling muscles and broad wings. He eats the pleading Omega and the coiled tail; he eats the sunrays and the talons and the power.

It's all his, now.

All his.

***

Will reads William's Blake's *Auguries of Innocence* on the flight to Brooklyn. He takes pictures of Prospect Park and the names carved into the front of the museum for Molly and the kids, knowing they'll appreciate it and smiling when, as expected, Danny asks if there are any dinosaurs at the museum.

No dinosaurs, he thinks, paying the cab fare and stepping out in front of the art gallery. *But there is a dragon.*

He has an appointment to see someone called Paula Harper, one of the curators and a Blake specialist. It had taken some convincing, because he isn't an academic, but she'd eventually acquiesced in the light of the FBI investigation.

'It's just this way, Mr Graham.' It isn't Miss Harper who greets him at the front desk, but an older gentleman called Julio. He's a colleague of Miss Harper and, after Will signs the register, leads him to the elevators. 'Y'know, you're the second person who's asked to see the Blake today.'

Will pauses, his eyes flashing gold behind his glasses. Fear trickles from his breastbone to his belly and the fine hairs stand up across the back of his neck.

He wouldn't.

They ride the elevator up in silence. There's an odd scent lingering in the air; a burned sweetness and something medicinal. Will thinks it might be coming from Julio, because he's sucking on a lozenge, but it doesn't seem strong enough.

They step out into the Painting Study and Storage Department.

'Wait here,' Julio says, offering him a kindly if patronizing smile – the kind of smile only an Alpha would give to an Omega. He wanders down the corridor, saying, as he does, 'Paula, I have another visit for the Great Red Dragon.'

Will steps forwards. There's something wrong. The air is thick with tension. The same burned caramel smell is everywhere.

It's not from Julio.

He catches movement from the corner of his eye – did somebody just slip behind him and step into the waiting elevator?

Turning, he looks down. There's a shiny brogue just peeking out from behind the open elevator doors. A brogue that wasn't there a moment ago.

Will comes closer. He can feel heat chasing cold up and down his spine. Everything in his screams to back away but his shadow is pushing forwards, rearing up and scenting the air like a snake about to strike.

I've found you.

The doors begin to slide shut and Will grabs for them. The sudden movement causes the man inside to turn. He's tall. Broad. Muscular. Details jump out at Will as he stares, but what shocks him most are the eyes.

Golden eyes.

Fear barely has time to raise the hammers of his heart before two big hands grab him up by the front of his jacket. Will hears himself yelp in panic as he's yanked forwards, and then the breath is knocked clean out of him as the Dragon lifts him off his feet and slams him against the back wall of the elevator. The whole cage rattles, and Will tastes copper as his teeth take a chunk out of his own cheek.

Then, with a guttural snarl, the Dragon throws Will out of the elevator to land, hard, on his back several feet away.

Will wrenches his glasses from his face – the tinted lenses are hindering his ability to see, and are smudged with sweat. He needs to *see* clearly, now more than ever.

He scrambles to his feet, grabbing for the doors but they have already closed. The arrow on the display above signals that the other man is headed down, back to the lobby and freedom.

No. No…

Will races for the stairs, his pulse racing, his whole body alight with adrenaline as he chases his prey. His senses are sharpened, he can smell the lingering scent of the other Omega. Burned caramel and antiseptic.

He's too late. The Dragon has gone. Likely changed clothes into a jogger's outfit so he can blend in with the people running in the park. Disappeared into the crowd like a shark returning to the gloom.

It doesn't matter. Will has seen his face. He has his scent. And he knows what he is. What those muddied yellow eyes mean.

I can see you now.

The Great Red Dragon is an Omega.

And the Beast from the Sea

Chapter Summary

Hannibal sends the Dragon after Molly and Walter, with dangerous consequences for his own children. Francis battles the Dragon for Reba.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! So, after many delays and false starts, I've finally got something that I'm more or less happy with for this chapter. I'll be writing and posting the next one as soon as I can, probably in the next few months again, since that seems to be my new timeline.

Got quite a few things going on in terms of my health at the moment, so I'm a bit all over the place with my fanfic writing. As always, I'll update as soon as I can. Thank you to everyone still reading and I hope you enjoy! xxx

ELEVEN

And the Beast from the Sea

‘He ate a painting.’

After a fruitless search in Prospect Park and the six blocks surrounding the Brooklyn Museum, Will takes the next flight out of New York back to Virginia and reports straight to Crawford at Quantico.

‘He *ate* it*?’* The Alpha sounds as confused as Will had felt when he first learned what the deranged Omega had gone to the Museum for.

‘He ate it up,’ Will confirms, nodding. ‘The Art Squad in New York snapped to it when they found out *what* he ate.’

Understatement, he thinks, remembering the Art Squad director’s horror and fury at the loss of such a valuable piece of history. *And William Blake is now trending online.*

He can feel Alana’s eyes on him, the cool blue stare of a thoughtful Alpha. He’s the only one standing – both Jack and Alana are sitting, Jack behind his desk, which is spread with

pictures of the dead families as they count down the days to the next full moon, and Alana waiting like a lioness in one of the visitor's chairs across from him.

Will can't sit. He can't settle. He's restless; he needs to do something. He has his hands in the pockets of his pants so they don't see how much he's shaking. He wants to call Molly and the kids but he's worried what he'll do to them if they see him like this.

He doesn't want to expose them to this darkness.

'They pulled two partial prints from the plastic pass he used,' Jack says, bringing his attention back to the moment. 'No ID, but it's still the same thumb that was on Mrs. Leeds's eye… And you're *sure* he was an Omega?'

His skepticism is grating, and Will does nothing to hide the flash of resentment that crosses his face.

'I know an Omega when I see one.'

'What about the docent at the museum?' Alana asks, drawing their attention to her. Will rolls his neck, his skin prickling and uncomfortably hot. The rough cotton of his shirt is unpleasant against his skin. He's over-sensitive today, everything feels too tight. Too much.

Definitely due a Heat. I need to take another suppressant soon.

'Oh, he had a sweet touch with her,' he says, one corner of his mouth lifting in a bitter smile. 'She had to have four stitches. Mild concussion, but he didn't kill her.'

'Why?' Alana's question gives him pause. Makes him think. It's Jack who voices his thoughts aloud.

'He'd have been better off killing her. And you.'

Will frowns. He remembers the look on the other Omega's face. The fear when he'd been seen and the snarl when he'd thrown Will from the elevator.

He's afraid.

'Maybe he's trying to stop,' Alana suggests, and something resonates with Will. Something that feels… right about it. But not completely. Not all the way.

At least a part of him wants to stop.

'You think there's a way to push him to being self-destructive?' Jack asks, jumping on the idea like a hound scenting blood. Alana frowns, evidently disliking the excitement in his voice.

'You mean, push him towards suicide?'

Jack's red eyes gleam and he sets his jaw, his lips thinning. The images of dead children, dead Alphas and mutilated Omegas sit between them – a brutal reminder of what the man is

capable of.

‘Suicide suits me just *fine*.’

Will shakes his head.

‘If he’s really trying to stop, he’s not going to kill himself,’ he says, the words bubbling up from the dark place inside him where he doesn’t have to think, he just *knows.* ‘How could he be sure his death would affect whatever’s inside him?’

Jack frowns. Then,

‘You must know something about him, otherwise you wouldn’t have found him.’

The bait is a good one. To deny it would be to tell an outright lie and Jack will catch him in it. But to admit the truth…

Will narrows his eyes, gold overtaking the blue as he takes a slow step closer to the Alpha’s desk.

‘Jack Crawford… fisher of men. Watching my cork move against the current.’ He nods. ‘You got me. Again.’ He wets his lips, tasting his own scent. Thick sugar and pine. Wildfire and salt. He tastes like freedom. Like the hunt. *‘Hannibal* told me where to find him. He knows. He knows who the Dragon is.’ A scoff. ‘He probably treated him.’

Jack nods, sighing as he does.

‘If Lecter can deliver, he’d better do it in your next conversation. Despair’s going around like the flu. Families are frightened. People are starting to panic. Householders will shoot relatives coming home late. Prowler calls will multiply, so will useless tips… Chicago and Buffalo police are under a media blitz.’

Will shakes his head. He knows the Dragon won’t hit there again. He’s moved on. What he says, however, is more important.

‘Hannibal’s not going to deliver.’

‘He wanted you to meet the Dragon,’ Jack insists. ‘He nudged you in that direction.’

Only to test me, Will thinks. *To see what I would do. How I would react.*

Aloud, he replies,

‘That *nudge* is a smokescreen for something much more coercive.’

Jack frowns.

‘You said he knows this killer. Probably treated him.’

Will rolls his eyes at him.

‘Think I can leach it out of him?’ he snaps. ‘Hannibal’s never going to walk, no matter what. He could raise the dead and they wouldn’t let him out. All that’s left for him is fun, so that’s what he’s going to have.’

Fun. No matter the cost.

***

Francis is lifting weights when the Dragon speaks to him again. He’s wearing a different outfit than normal; sweatpants and a tank top covering his tattoo. His silk kimono is draped over the image of *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*, like the shed skin of a snake.

He wears no mask.

He’s lifting more than he’s ever lifted before. Up; two hundred and eighty pounds from the floor to his chest in one heave. Now over his head.

He feels good. Reba is safe from the Dragon and everything feels good.

Until –

DID YOU THINK YOU COULD ESCAPE ME SO EASILY?

Startled by the loud voice, Francis nearly drops the weight, swaying beneath it. He lowers it down, the plates thudding and clanking on the floor. His arms hang by his sides, beads of sweat glistening in the afternoon sunlight slanting through the attic window.

I THINK ABOUT HER, TOO. REBA. SHE IS MINE, JUST AS YOU ARE.

Francis whimpers, his golden eyes darting to the silk-draped artwork. He can see the ripples as breath puffs out of the painting. His heart begins to race and his lungs feel very tight. The skin on the back of his neck is hot as coals and tingling in the air.

The shredded paper sits heavy in his bowels.

YOU SHOULD BE PREPARING FOR THE BECOMING.

‘I am… I… sh-shorry.’ Francis’s speech is failing, now; fear sapping his ability to form words.

STUPID BOY, the Dragon sneers. His voice is strong and clear. He has no trouble saying ‘s’. *PREPARE FOR THE BECOMING. LIFT THE WEIGHT.*

Francis seizes the barbell and strains. His mind strains with his body. He tries desperately not to think of Reba; of her perfect skin and dark curls, of the way she feels wrapped around him, or the way she moves when they’re together.

That’s so sweet, D.

Fear leeches his strength. He gets the weight up to his thighs, but he can't make the turn up to his chest. It's no good; he knows it's for the Dragon but the offering is hollow and the weight thuds down again.

NOT ACCEPTABLE. YOU ARE WEAK AND PATHETIC. A MEWLING OMEGA. NOT WORTHY OF BEING CALLED DRAGON.

Francis shudders, feeling the Dragon move all around him. Feeling its muscles move under his skin again, shifting and swelling beneath the tattoo.

I'LL TEAR REBA APART AND RUB PIECES OF HER INTO YOUR UGLY FACE IF YOU OPPOSE ME. I'LL HANG YOU WITH HER LARGE INTESTINE. YOU KNOW I CAN. PUT 300 POUNDS ON THE BAR.

He adds the plates to the bar. He's never lifted as much as 280 until today.

LIFT IT.

'I… c-can't,' Francis gasps, straining against the heaviness of it.

NO, the Dragon agrees, and Francis sees the room turn red before his bulging eyes. *YOU CAN'T.*

He grips the bar and it bows as the weight rises to his shoulders. Up over his head with ease, a deep rumbling purr rattling from his throat.

BUT I CAN. I CAN DO ANYTHING.

The next day, Francis drives back to Baltimore to speak to Dr Lecter.

***

'It… stunned me… the first time I saw it.' He doesn't stumble over the 's' too badly. It's only a bit mushy. He almost doesn't care. He just needs to talk to Lecter about what's happening.

He needs to keep Reba safe.

'Like Blake peeked in your ear and saw the Red Dragon there,' Dr Lecter suggests, his rich voice sliding down the phone line and soothing him instantly. He can imagine the Alpha in the office with him again – they are in the leather armchairs sat across from each other, Dr Lecter in a smart suit and tie, his blond hair neatly combed, Francis in his dark jacket and jeans. 'Coiled inside you,' Dr Lecter adds, as if reading Francis's mind. Plucking out his hidden thoughts and laying them bare to examine. 'Coiled around you.'

He knows what I am. I am the Omega caught in the Dragon's tail. But he doesn't find me repulsive.

'This new two-ness with the Dragon,' Dr Lecter continues, curiosity warming his tone, 'it's disorienting for you, isn't it?'

‘Our wills were one,’ Francis says, golden eyes lowered. ‘But not now. Not since… her.’

I want Reba… I want to be hers… I think she could accept me for what I am. But the Dragon… He only wants to destroy her.

He remembers the Dragon’s fury. It’s threat to hang him by Reba’s intestine.

He can almost feel the tightness of the slippery offal around his throat, choking his breath.

‘The Dragon… has never spoken to me before,’ he mumbles, words slurring into each other with stress. Dr Lecter doesn’t comment, even as he prowls around the chair. A hunting Alpha. ‘It was frightening.’

When he glances up again, Dr Lecter is back in his chair. Perhaps he never left. Perhaps Francis is just being paranoid.

‘What did it say?’ Dr Lecter asks, drawing the truth from him like pus from a wound. As much as Francis doesn’t want to remember, doesn’t want to acknowledge what happened, he has to tell him.

‘It… called my name.’ He shudders, thinking back to the way the Dragon mounted him. Rutted against him and bit into his neck. Claimed him as its own. ‘It wants her.’

Dr Lecter is quiet for a moment. Then,

‘If it weren’t for the power of your Becoming, if it weren’t for the Dragon, you could never have had her.’

Francis shakes his head. No. No… She’s *his.* She’s special.

‘I… put my hand… on her beating heart…’ His own slams against his ribs like an animal kicking to be free. ‘H-heard the sound of her *living* voice.’ He wets his lips, worrying at the harelip as he trembles in awe. ‘A… *living*… woman… How bizarre.’

It had been surreal. Intoxicating and addictive.

He needs more.

Dr Lecter remains quiet, perhaps considering his confession. What it reveals about him. No matter – Francis trusts that he will not betray his secrets. They are connected, after all. Dr Lecter understands him.

He glances around, checking over his shoulder in case the tattoo on his back is rippling and sprouting wings or fangs again, before adding, quietly,

‘I… don’t want to give her to the Dragon.’

‘The Dragon is in your belly now.’ When Dr Lecter speaks, his voice a low purr inside Francis’s ear, he can almost imagine the Alpha leaning in from beside him. A comforting

presence that he welcomes and cherishes in these confusing, difficult times. ‘You can choose to have her alive. You don’t have to worry about feeling love for her.’

As suddenly as he was beside him, Dr Lecter is back in the armchair across from him. His eyes gleam like dark chips when he adds, casually,

‘You can always toss the Dragon to someone else.’

Francis looks up. It’s true – he can feel the Dragon in his belly, like a swirling heat. He imagines it as a fire, waiting to rise up and scorch the land. Immense and powerful and unstoppable.

But to toss it to someone else? To choose who to send such rage after?

He’s never been in control of the Dragon before… He’s never been the strong one.

An Alpha would control the Dragon. An Alpha would eat the Dragon to protect his mate. And I ate the Dragon. He is mine to control.

Francis feels himself shift. He adjusts in the chair, his gaze sharpening. He can feel the prickle as his eyes change color, and he imagines they are red, not gold.

He is on the hunt. Stalking new prey. And, as an Alpha, he wants to go after an Omega. A bothersome threat to his life and his relationship with Dr Lecter.

‘Will Graham… interests me.’ He tosses out the line, testing the water to see if Dr Lecter will bite. If this is someone he still cares for, as the TattleCrime magazine suggests, or if Freddie Lounds has her facts wrong. ‘Odd-looking, for an Omega… Not very handsome but… *purposeful*.’

In his cell, Hannibal squashes the irrational urge to snarl down the phone at the impetuous Omega daring to call his beloved Will ugly, and instead loads the bait hook for the Dragon to bite.

‘He has a family,’ he murmurs. ‘A Beta wife and adopted son.’ He pauses, choosing his next words carefully. ‘This is… difficult for me.’

‘You were Bonded,’ Francis says, remembering the articles. The trial and courtroom scandals. The way Will Graham dragged Dr Lecter’s name and reputation through the mud when he was called to testify. ‘He was your mate.’

‘We have two children together. They are with the Beta. I want them back.’ Hannibal delivers the news quickly and without emotion. Best not to rile the Dragon, or tempt it with potential. Molly and Walter will be plenty offering enough. His next words are the truth, but he knows the Omega posing as the Dragon will hear them as he wants. ‘I… would be willing to share them with whoever is worthy of being my next mate.’

A sharp intake of breath, as expected. An expectant pause.

He has him.

Hannibal smiles, his eyes gleaming red in the low light.

‘Save yourself. Kill them both. And bring the twins to me.’

***

That night, Will dreams of the ocean. The water is black, the sky an endless blanket of distant stars, and he is fighting crashing waves that threaten to drag him under. Everything is too hot and he’s so thirsty he could scream. His throat is aching, never wetted by the moisture all around him.

Am I sick again? These feel like the fever dreams I had last time.

He claws at his own face, desperate to slough the skin off and scratch the itch buzzing just beneath. The nape of his neck is on fire – a thicket of antlers scraping his spine as he tosses and turns in the motel bed.

Hannibal. I need Hannibal.

He isn’t sure he’s awake when he calls. When he speed-dials home and waits for the line to connect. His sweaty hands ceaselessly comb back his damp curls, peeling off his wet t-shirt and pushing down his slick-soaked boxers.

The first touch on his aching erection drags a moan past his lips, quickly stifled in his pillow.

‘Will?’

Molly’s voice is thick with sleep and tinged with confusion. He’s woken her – it’s the middle of the night, after all – and the first thing she’s heard is his guttural sound of pleasure and need.

‘Molly,’ he rasps, his voice scratchy with how swollen his scent glands are. He keens, a sound only an Omega can make, calling for relief, and in the back of his mind he wishes he had surrendered to the urge to phone the Alpha instead of his wife.

‘Oh, honey,’ Molly says, realizing immediately what’s happening. ‘It’s gonna be okay. I’m right here. Do you have a neutralizer with you? Will that help?’

‘Need *you*,’ Will growls, stroking himself faster as he rocks his hips up into the touch. ‘Need to be inside you.’

‘That’s just the Heat talking,’ Molly replies, still in the same soothing tone as before. ‘Can you get to the bathroom for me? Grab your kit and get a suppressant.’

Will snarls his frustration, even if he knows she’s right. This can’t end well – if he winds himself up with this, he could trigger a full Heat whilst he’s alone and vulnerable in a motel room. But he doesn’t want to stop touching himself – it feels good. Can’t he just feel good for a little bit?

‘Molly…’

Hannibal.

The room shakes. Water crashes in his ears. Will squeezes his eyes shut, blinded by sweat as it rolls off his forehead, and he feels phantom lips on his, tracing the line of his jaw, down his throat and lower.

I need my Alpha.

'Will… Will! Talk to me!' Molly sounds frantic in his ear and Will bares his teeth at the phone, irritated that she's there, that she's still talking to him when it should be Hannibal. It should be his mate.

I wish I'd never called her. Never met her.

'Leave me alone,' he snaps, hanging up and throwing the phone to the end of the bed. Moving his hand faster now, he chases the spiraling pleasure and grips his own throat with the other, choking until climax rips through him in a wave of white bliss.

He arches from the bed, striping his t-shirt with white, and watches as fireflies dance across the vaulted ceiling of the Norman Chapel in Palermo. It is the foyer to the Mind Palace that he shares with Hannibal; one of the many rooms where he can always find the other man.

We're conjoined.

A salty sea breeze tickles his nose, enticing him to turn. When he sees the altar, set with a dozen flickering red votive candles, his blood runs cold.

There is a teacup balanced on the edge, seconds from falling. It will smash if it lands on the flagstone floor.

Stay with me. Stay here with me.

The teacup falls.

A buzzing brings him back to reality and Will opens his eyes. He's soaked in sweat and shaking with fever. His cell is vibrating against his leg, the lit screen blaring against the darkness of the room.

'Hullo?' he mumbles, bringing it to his ear without looking at it.

'Molly called,' Jack says, his voice thick with Alpha dominance. 'Get in the fucking bathroom and take a shot before I come over there and stab you with it myself. Now!'

'Jack?' Will's up and moving before he can think about the command. About his own response to it and how much it annoys him that the Alpha bosses him around. 'I'm not your Omega. You can't tell me what to do.'

Even as he says it, he snaps on the bathroom light, props his phone between his shoulder and ear, and unzips his toiletries bag to pull out a hypodermic needle of neutralizer.

‘Have you taken the shot yet?’ Jack asks, ignoring the rebuke. Will huffs, but he uncaps the needle and slides it into the meat of his thigh, just under the edge of his damp boxers.

‘Yeah,’ he says, tossing the pieces into the sink to tidy up in the morning. ‘You’re welcome.’

‘Call your wife,’ Jack says. ‘You owe her an apology for worrying her.’

He hangs up before Will can say anything else, and Will stares down at the black screen as he waits for the suppressant to calm his body down. As he waits for the urge to scream to pass.

It’s another hour before he sends a single text message apologizing to Molly. It’s all he can face right now. All he can do.

He misses his Alpha so fucking much it hurts.

I just want to go home.

***

Francis drives to Maine after speaking with Dr Lecter. He carves his mark into a tree in the woods near the wood cabin where Will Graham lives with his Beta wife and three children, and then he waits for the female to return with the young.

Fresh snow covers the ground, piled in drifts against rocks and at the bases of the ancient pines. The air is bitter cold. Everything is cleaner out here than in the city. It smells crisper. Fresher.

This place will be good, when it comes time to kill Molly Graham and her son. There will be no one around to hear her scream as she dies.

He films them, Mrs. Graham and her offspring, as well as Dr Lecter’s twins. His chest feels strangely tight as he does and his hands tremble. He feels sweat bead on his brow.

I would be willing to share them with whoever is worthy of being my next mate.

He wants to be worthy. He wants to badly to be worthy of Dr Lecter… of the Dragon. He *is* the Dragon… and yet… there are times when he feels just like any other Omega.

Craving an Alpha.

A real one.

When he returns to Grandmother’s house to process the film, he feels strangely empty. Oddly lonely. He invites Reba over for the evening and is grateful when she accepts. Drives out to fetch her with an extra kick in his heart and a smile tugging at the corners of his ugly, misshapen mouth.

Reba bring a couple of vinyls with her and gentle, classical music flows out across the parlor as she mixes them another martini. As she works, Francis sets up his screen and winds the film tape in the projector reel.

He needs to study the house. The surroundings. His prey. He is a predator, a hunter. Molly and Walter Graham are his prey.

‘I have a little homework,’ he says, as Reba brings her drink with her towards the old sagging couch.

‘Sure,’ she says, bright and sweet as ever. ‘If I’m keeping you from working… I can go.’

It’s a flirtatious comment and they both know it, but Francis answers seriously.

‘No. I want you… to be here.’ He wanted to say “stay” but without the Dragon’s courage, he can’t get the sound past his teeth and lips.

The Dragon is in your belly now.

It is resting, now. Patient. But he can call on it when he needs.

Francis accepts the martini glass from Reba, mindful of how delicate and fragile her hands are compared to his own. How small she is.

How breakable.

He could crunch off her fingers in a single bite. Snap her neck.

‘I have some… film… that I need to check,’ he says, glancing down to the side. ‘It won’t take long.’

‘Hm.’ Reba sits down on the couch. Makes herself comfortable. She’s good at doing that. ‘Does it have a soundtrack?’

Francis takes a seat next to her, the leather of his belt creaking as he moves.

‘No.’

In a waft of sweet shampoo and Reba’s unobtrusive Beta scent, she leans closer to whisper against his lips,

‘May I keep the music?’

Francis’s mouth is dry. He tries to swallow, his eyes prickling with what he prays is Alphan red, not Omega gold.

‘Uh-huh.’

Reba smiles.

‘I’ll think I’ll just stretch out here, then, for a few minutes. If you don’t mind.’ When Francis goes to move, she stills him with a hand on his thigh. ‘No, don’t move.’ She curls up against his side, luxuriating in the heat radiating from his body, enjoying the feel of his broad chest

and thick, roped muscles. Gives a happy little hum as she wriggles down into position and settles herself into position. ‘I’ve got plenty of room. Wake me up if I drop off.’

Francis holds his breath, his free arm stretched over the back of the loveseat, the other clutching the martini glass, marveling at the fact that there’s a living woman like Reba pressed against him, her head so close to where the Dragon now resides, even as he watches a film of another Beta woman about to die.

About to Change.

He dips his head to scent her hair, memorizing the tang of her citrus shampoo and the unique scent of *her*, and then he flicks on the projector to begin watching.

‘Are these your nocturnal animals?’ Reba murmurs, stroking up and down Francis’s thigh as she listens to the music and the hum and whir of the film reel. At the other man’s confirming hum, she smiles. ‘Think they know they’re being filmed?’

Francis watches as Grace Lecter-Graham, a small blonde girl with Dr Lecter’s cheekbones and sharp eyes, turns her head to look around the front yard, as if searching for something. She tugs a brunette boy closer to her, signing something to him, and they run inside. The boy’s name is Daniel.

Grace and Daniel Lecter-Graham.

Dr Lecter’s children.

‘No,’ Francis whispers, the back of his neck tingling with heat. His eyes pulse and he feels a sound swell in his throat, barely suppressed with a sharp swallow in case it’s a purr.

He will kill the Betas and take the twins to Dr Lecter.

He will be worthy.

He is the Dragon.

It’s almost the full moon. He has work to do.

***

It’s been a mad few days at work. Tourists to Moosehead Lake are more demanding than anyone else, and Molly’s been having trouble sleeping because she’s worried about Will. Getting a text from him earlier today, telling her that he’s feeling better, that he’ll call in a few days, has settled the nest of anxiety in her stomach, and she sinks into the wicker chair on the porch of their logwood cabin, her boots propped up on the railing as she enjoys the view of the lake.

Savoring the warmth seeping from the mug of tea in her hands, she lets the silence wash over her, knowing the kids are safe playing with the dogs in the back yard. There’s absolutely nothing for her to do today, other than cook dinner in a few hours, so she can just relax and listen to the birds. Wood pigeons and sparrows, at this time of year. The chittering of a

squirrel and, maybe, if she listens hard enough, the distant sound of the moose herd for which the area is named.

It's going to be alright, she thinks, smiling to herself. *I miss Will, but he'll be home soon. We'll be a family again, and everything is going to be okay.*

Wally's terrified voice shatters the calm.

'MOM!'

He comes running up to her, his face flushed and eyes bright with tears. Molly stares up at him, her heart hammering in her chest.

'Mom, something's wrong with the dogs,' Wally says, leading her around to the snow-covered yard where the pack lie in various states of distress. Some are even unconscious.

Gracie looks up from where she's curled around Winston, strands of pale hair clinging to wet cheeks.

'I think they're dying.'

Molly feels faint. She imagines Will coming home to the news that their dogs are all dead. *His* dogs. Dead.

'Let's get them to the vets,' she says. 'Come on. Right now. Let's go.'

It's the longest thirty-minute drive she's ever done.

***

Will has been taking the dogs to this veterinary practice since he and Molly moved to Moosehead Lake. They know every animal by name, and take them straight through to the back when Molly rushes inside with Wally and the twins in tow, explaining the situation.

During the wait, Molly stares at her phone screen and wonders if she should call Will. If she should tell him and ask him to come home.

I told him to leave, she thinks, guilt churning her stomach like a hot rock. *He didn't want to, and now he's almost had a Heat triggered because of the stress. I can't do this to him. I can't be such a burden.*

Will trusts her with the dogs. He trusts her with the kids. If she calls him now, she'll have broken that trust.

She'll have failed him, in a way she promised never to do.

When the veterinarian emerges from the operating theatre, Molly stands so quickly her head spins.

‘They may have gotten into something they shouldn’t have,’ the veterinarian says, standing there with a grimace on her face and her hands in the pockets of her white lab coat. ‘Has there been any changes in their diet?’

Molly’s guilt reaches a new level and she feels the hot rock swell up into her throat. Coughs to clear it, glancing down at the seats beside her, where Wally and the twins are watching the exchange with solemn expressions.

‘My, um… my husband usually makes their food from scratch,’ she admits, shifting from foot to foot. ‘But he’s out of town and… it’s a lot of work… I don’t have the time around my shifts. I’ve been feeding them canned food.’

‘Was that canned food made in China?’ the vet asks, careful not to comment on the change in diet. Perhaps the stricken look on Molly’s face is enough. If she could spare an hour a day to do the prep, she would, but it’s just her at the moment.

Molly frowns. She doesn’t think so. It’s expensive stuff, high-quality from the local pet food store where Will gets the raw ingredients. But still –

‘Is it… *bad* to be made in China?’ she asks, not liking the question. The implication.

The veterinarian shrugs.

‘If you’re pet food,’ she says. ‘Dogs get poisoned by Chinese pet food all the time. Pet food safety isn’t regulated the same way as human food. And it’s barely regulated at all in China. There have been thousands of illnesses and deaths.’

‘Thousands?’ Molly’s panic is rising, and Wally’s starting to feel the effects. He shifts, wide eyes sliding from his mom to the veterinarian and back.

‘Are the dogs gonna die?’ he asks, jumping when Gracie slips her free hand between his own and squeezes.

‘It’s okay,’ she says, sweet and solemn as always, just as Molly turns to him and says, reassuringly,

‘No, they’re not gonna –’ She pauses, thinks about it. Turns to the veterinarian. ‘*Are* the dogs going to die?’

‘No,’ the veterinarian replies, smiling at the palpable sigh of relief from Molly, Wally and Gracie. ‘I mean, you got them here really fast and the activated charcoal should soak up whatever’s in their systems.’ A pause. ‘It *would* help, though, if you could bring by a sample of whatever they’ve been eating, so we can run some tests.’

‘Yeah, of course,’ Molly says, nodding quickly. ‘I’ll bring it by tomorrow.’

‘In the meantime,’ the veterinarian continues, ‘we’ll keep the dogs here overnight and we’ll monitor their recovery.’ She smiles down at Wally and Gracie, kindly eyes glancing at Danny but not lingering because he seems focused on the floor tiles. ‘They should be fine.’

‘Thank you.’ Molly watches her leave and then sinks back down into the chair, her legs weak. As she leans over, holding her head in her hands and trying not to think about what a royal fuck-up she is – and how much this is going to cost them – Wally looks at her sideways.

‘Are you gonna tell Dad?’

Molly cringes. Damn, he’s a perceptive little shit.

‘Erm…’ She thinks how to word it. Glances at Gracie and Danny, who are both watching her closely as well. When she speaks, she signs as well. ‘You know how I always said secrets were bad and you shouldn’t keep secrets? Well, I have an amendment to that. We're gonna keep this secret for now. Just us. Okay?’

‘You want us to lie?’ Gracie doesn’t sound accusing, but Molly feels the words like a razor.

She remembers Will’s panic, a couple of years ago, when he caught Gracie lying for something Danny had done.

They’ll turn into him, Mol. I can’t have that! I can’t have his darkness in them! We have to show them what it is to be good. Please. Please help me.

Another flare of guilt. But stressing Will into a Heat whilst he’s thousands of miles from home would be worse.

This is the lesser of two evils, she’s sure of it.

‘It’s not a lie if you keep your mouth shut,’ Molly says, getting up and ushering them all to the door. ‘Your dad has enough to worry about, without worrying if I’m gonna poison the dogs again, okay? Now, who wants to eat out tonight?’

‘Can we have ice-cream?’ Wally asks, easily placated and distracted.

‘Sure,’ Molly says, because what’s one more fuck-up in an afternoon of them. ‘Let’s go to that diner in town, and we’ll have sundaes afterwards.’

She doesn’t notice the notice from the FBI on the wall of the clinic waiting room, warning pet owners to watch out for animal mutilations.

***

The moon shines down the oculus in Hannibal's cell, creating a spotlight of soft silver. Hannibal stands within it, raising a hand to the light, turning it slowly. He listens carefully to the hitched breathing of his beloved, whose anger rages like a furnace beneath his skin, revealed in the fiery smoke of his sweet scent and the thundering of his heart as he paces back and forth on the other side of the glass wall.

Hannibal Lecter may be caged, but Will is trapped within his charade of a life, and his beast is tugging against the chains of its confinement.

‘I’m not fortune’s fool,’ Will says, anger coiled like a snake within his chest as he thinks back to the last seventy-two hours. The attack in Brooklyn. The debrief. His near-constant Heat symptoms. ‘I’m yours.’

I was an idiot to trust you. To fall back into our twisted game.

‘“Behold the Great Red Dragon”.’ He scoffs.’ Paces again. He’s so restless today. A run this morning didn’t cut it. He needs something else. A fight, perhaps. To sink his teeth into someone and *bite*.

‘And did you?’ Hannibal asks, tracking Will’s progress from his position beneath the moon. A full moon. The Dragon’s moon.

Kill the Betas. And bring the twins to me.

‘Brooklyn Museum is closed to the public on Tuesdays,’ Will says, his restless feet carrying him back to the other side of the room. ‘And researchers are admitted, you knew that’s when we’d both be going.’

‘A sophisticated intelligence can forecast many things,’ Hannibal says, abandoning the moon in favor of approaching the Plexi-glass cell wall. A smirk, his eyes flickering red. ‘I suppose mine is sophisticated enough.’

As predicted, Will’s eyes smolder gold. His scent rises up like a wildfire, flooding the room.

‘He’s contacted you,’ the Omega says, and Hannibal’s smile widens further, like a shark scenting blood.

Is that simple anger, mylimasis, or a hint of jealousy that I hear?

‘How do you imagine he’s contacted me?’ he asks, standing very still and watching the twitching, flushed man before him. ‘Personal ads? Writing notes of admiration on toilet paper?’

‘Alana thinks he’s trying to stop,’ Will says, tossing the bait out. Hannibal decides to bite. For Will.

‘To begin to understand the Dragon, to hear the cold drips in his darkness, Dr Bloom would have to see things she could never see.’ His lips tug into a cold sneer. ‘She would have to fly through time.’

Will growls, long and low. It tapers off, almost becoming a whine. Desperate and pleading.

‘There’s a family out there who don’t know he’s coming.’ His voice trembles. Breathless. ‘We could *save* them. Tell me who he is.’

‘I don’t know who he is.’ Hannibal keeps his face open. Honest. He watches as Will studies him and he sees the moment when his former mate finds the truth in his statement. Then, ‘When you close your eyes, Will… is it your family you see? Is it our children?’

Will surges forwards, teeth bared in a snarl. He slams both palms flat against the clear plastic, his chest heaving.

‘He wouldn’t!’

‘No,’ Hannibal agrees, slipping a hand through one of the air vents and pressing it to Will’s abdomen. Right over the scar where he stabbed him, all those years ago. ‘He wouldn’t.’

Will gasps, shuddering at the contact. To Hannibal’s surprised pleasure, he presses into it for a moment, before rearing backwards and stumbling away with a gasping,

‘Don’t *touch* me.’

‘You’re very flushed, Will,’ Hannibal says, studying the Omega with a near-clinical precision. ‘And your eyes are too gold. When did you last experience a Heat?’

Will curls his hands into his hair and tugs, grounding himself in the flashes of pain as he tugs on his scalp. Scowling up at the Alpha, he shakes his head.

‘You don’t get to ask those kind of questions anymore, Dr Lecter.’ He rolls his shoulders and straightens, willing his body to calm down. For the fever raging through him to cool and for the nape of his neck to stop tingling. Pushing through the fog in his mind, he forces the conversation back to a safer topic. ‘How’s he choosing them?’

Hannibal narrows his eyes, displeased with the distraction.

‘How he’s choosing them is *not* how you’ll catch him.’

‘How?’ Will demands, and the Alpha rolls his eyes.

‘Social media, I imagine,’ he says. ‘Can’t be too careful with privacy settings.’

A cold wave of realization washes over him, causing Will to approach the glass once again.

‘Do you know who they are?’ he whispers. ‘The next family?’

Hannibal smiles, his eyes dark and cold.

‘Yes.’

Will feels sick.

I was in love with this man. I had sex with him. Bonded with him. Have children with him.

‘And you’re willing to let them die.’

Just to prove a point.

Hannibal shrugs.

‘They’re not my family, Will.’ A flicker of something in his eyes. Something that draws Will in, like a moth to a flame. ‘And *I’m* not letting them die. You are.’

***

The full moon sits high and bright in the sky, obliterating the stars around it. The Graham’s cabin sits below, nestled between trees and snow, silhouetted against the shining mirror surface of the half-frozen lake.

Orange light burns in the windows. Flames from the fire flicker. Molly and Walter pass back and forth before the windows, chattering as they tidy up.

The twins went to bed an hour ago. The lights in their bedroom windows were extinguished, leaving the panes black.

Francis crouches beneath the tree that he marked, resting easily on his haunches as he watches. He is calm now, a great sense of peace radiating outwards as he waits for Molly and Walter to go to bed.

When they do, and the lights go out all across the cabin, he slips Grandmother’s teeth into his own misshapen mouth, feeling the cool, slick slide of the dentures over his gums before they lock into place. His Alphan teeth are crooked and sharp, perfect for ripping flesh and tearing through muscle.

Perfect for killing unworthy Betas.

Tonight, Molly Graham will be changed. She will be offered as a sacrifice to the Great Red Dragon, and he will bring the twins home to Dr Lecter, who will claim him as his perfect equal.

Together, they will be unstoppable. The Doctor and the Dragon.

After another two hours have passed, as the night deepens, Francis pulls a black net mask over his face and rolls it down, leaving only his chin and mouth free.

It’s time.

***

Molly hasn’t been sleeping that well. Ever since Will called her in a Heat daze, whimpering and snarling that she wasn’t his Alpha, she’s been listening for her phone.

Maybe that’s why she hears the rattle of the doorknob. The turn and click of the lock being picked. A sound that would have sent the dogs into a flurry of protective barks, had they been here.

Had they not been poisoned.

He goes after the pets first.

Will had mentioned it to her, on one of their late-night chats. Duchess, the new-new dog he's just rehomed. The one he claimed because her family had been slaughtered by The Tooth Fairy.

And now he's here. He's here to kill Molly and her children.

Her heart pounding, cold sweat beading across his forehead and making her sweater cling to her back, Molly sits bolt upright in bed and strains to hear past the rush of blood in her ears. When she hears a creak of footsteps on wood, she shoves the tangled covers back and slips her feet into the sheepskin slipper boots by the bedside, too panicked to even feel how cold it is.

They have to get out of here. Right now.

She almost screams when the bedroom opens. Whips around so fast she pulls something in her neck and stares, terrified, at her adopted daughter standing on the threshold.

'Gracie!' she gasps, her breath punching out of her.

'There's a bad man outside,' Gracie whispers, trembling in her dressing gown and pajamas. 'I'm scared.'

Molly puts a finger up to her lips, silencing her, and then begins to sign.

Follow me. Keep quiet.

She takes Gracie by the hand and leads her to Danny's room, each of them silent on their feet.

Get your brother, Molly instructs, even as she goes to wake Walter. She rouses him with strokes to the head and, as soon as his bleary eyes are open enough to see her, signs for him to stay silent. To follow. Walter nods and climbs out of bed as well, sliding his bare feet into his fur-skin boots as Molly helps him into a dressing robe.

Grace and Daniel enter the room, pale and holding hands tightly as they battle terror.

This way, Molly instructs, unlatching Walter's bedroom window on the back of the house and beckoning them over. *Down.*

She catches hold of Grace and Walter when they're near, bringing her face close to theirs to whisper, so quietly,

'Wait for me by the car. Count to one hundred. If you see *anyone* else but me, run for the road. Stay together.'

Wally and Grace nod, both of them trying to be brave, and Walter takes Grace's hand to guide her and Danny down the shingled porch roof and onto the railing to freedom.

Molly hears footsteps on the staircase, the wood groaning protest at the Dragon's weight. Quick as she can, she shuts the door of Walter's room, hiding out of sight. She only has a second to spare.

Francis emerges onto the landing of Will Graham's home, moving with fluid purpose. The gun feels heavy in his hand. A reassuring weight. He knows how to use it. When to strike. Where to aim. He has syringes of ketamine in his pocket for the twins, but he'll shoot Molly and Walter Graham before he sedates the youngest children for transportation.

FEAST ON THEM ALL. I WANT EVERYTHING.

The Dragon's voice is a roar. It cannot be ignored. It drives Francis onwards, steadying his pace so as not to make too much sound on the floorboards when he moves.

He goes towards the master bedroom, which is housed at the back of the cabin. As he does, Molly slips out of her hiding spot and slides down the hallway, keeping to the shadows reaching up the walls. She descends the stairs, avoiding the creaky spots, and hears hurried footsteps across the ceiling as the Dragon goes from her bedroom to Walter's.

There's a snarl. It sounds surreal.

Outside, Wally, Gracie and Danny huddle by the car, shivering in their pajamas. Wally and Gracie keep time, while Danny's wide eyes watch for Molly or the bad man to emerge from the house.

'Forty-four,' Wally whispers. 'Forty-five, forty-six…'

Francis clatters down the stairs and strides through the living room. He yanks open the front door, scenting the air and despising the layers of dog crisscrossing it, making it hard to pin down exactly where the Betas went.

Where the twins went.

FORGET LECTER, the Dragon rumbles. *SAVE YOURSELF. KILL THEM ALL.*

His eyes pulse, shining bright behind the dark mesh of his mask. Beneath his leather jacket and black jeans, Francis feels hot. His skin is tingling. The back of his neck is on fire.

When he breathes out, the air ripples with the furnace raging inside him.

He whips his tail back and forth in anger, lashing the air with frustration.

YOU CANNOT HIDE FROM ME. I AM THE DRAGON. I WILL FIND YOU.

Beneath the porch, huddled amongst the dust and dirt of the woodpile, Molly holds her breath and hopes the Dragon doesn't think to look down here.

She only has one chance to get out with the kids.

There's movement to her left. She sees Wally crouch on his belly behind the car, looking over at her. Before he can open his mouth, she signs for him to be silent again.

The Dragon's boots start to move away. They start to move in the direction of the car. Of the kids. It's only a matter of seconds before he sees the footsteps in the snow, leading right to

them.

Molly's pulse kicks up another notch. Panic makes her taste copper and her head swims.

No. No, no, no, he can't have the kids. Not her baby. Not Will's.

She'll die before she lets anything happen to them.

Grabbing a chunk of wood, Molly throws it as hard and as far as she can in the opposite direction, hoping to distract him. It works – the Dragon races off after the sound, giving Wally, Gracie and Danny the chance to run under the porch and crowd up against Molly.

I've got you, she signs, hugging them close, peppering their foreheads with kisses and handing them all their thermal coats.

Then, knowing the Dragon won't be fooled by the wood for long, she aims her car fob at the truck and sets off the alarm. As footsteps thunder above them again, Molly ushers the kids to follow her and they race for the woods.

The headlights flash and the horn blares, even as the car alarm begins to wail. Francis immediately returns, bringing the gun up and firing three shots with deadly aim in quick succession at the driver's window and the front windscreen. When he lowers his gun and sees that he's been fooled, he bares his Alphan teeth in a growl.

THE TRACKS. BENEATH THE PORCH.

He jumps down into the snow and sees four sets of footprints leading beneath the house and then out, into the forest. The tracks are deep, cutting through snowdrifts.

He can easily follow.

'Oh god,' Molly gasps, clutching at the stitch in her ribs. 'Come on, kids! Come on!'

'There!' Gracie cries, pointing to headlights carving through the darkness. The main road is just up ahead, busy enough to still have traffic at this time.

'Stay here,' Molly pants, dashing down the bank and running headlong into the path of the car. 'STOP! PLEASE!'

The car skids to a stop, horn blaring once, and the driver jumps out to yell at her, even as Molly frantically beckons the kids to clamber into the backseat.

'What the hell are you doing? I almost killed you!'

'Get in!' Molly says, shoving Danny up into the car when he hesitates. 'Stay down!'

There's a *thwip* and a spray of hot blood across her face, and then Molly watches as the driver drops, dead, shot with unerring accuracy in the back of the skull.

Fuck. Oh, fuck. Oh my god. Not my kids.

Shuddering, her mind switching to the basic essentials of survival, Molly steps over the dead man and takes his place behind the steering wheel.

'Stay down,' she repeats, slamming her foot onto the accelerator. Tires squeal and the stench of burning rubber fills the air, but the car lurches forwards and they're free.

They're escaping.

There's another *thwip*. A crack as glass shatters. And then pain. Terrible, burning agony in her shoulder.

Molly gasps, fights the nausea and dizziness threatening to overwhelm her.

She's been shot.

Just keep driving. We're not safe yet.

More bullets. Glass breaks across the kids and they cry out, huddling together between the front seats and the back.

She's been shot.

Just keep going. Please, God, let somebody find us soon and help.

She's been shot.

We're okay. He's not following. We got away. We survived.

Molly breathes. Keeps breathing. And she doesn't stop driving until she reaches the hospital.

Behind them, enraged at his failure, Francis tips his head back and roars at the moon.

***

They're not my family, Will. And I'm not letting them die. You are.

Will's in the shower when Jack calls. He's burning up again, feverish with anger and itching to take it out on someone.

Itching to fight with Hannibal. To punch and bite him until he bleeds. To pin him down and feel him writhe under him, powerless for *once* in their goddamn relationship.

I wish I'd slit his throat back at the Verger estate, when I'd had the chance, he thinks, scrubbing his hair so hard that suds go everywhere. *I wish I'd attacked him in Florence, before Chiyoh had shot me. Slipped that knife into his carotid and watched the blood spray.*

He braces himself against the cold tiles of the cubicle, sluicing away the shampoo with cold water. His head is pounding fit to burst and his jaw aches with the need to clamp down on something. He's restless but exhausted, and there's an odd ache inside.

He could touch himself. Think of Molly until he comes. Think of high cheekbones and cruel eyes, thin lips and a smirk he wants to smack or kiss away –

I don't want to think about you, anymore.

He left Hannibal for a reason. Hannibal is no good for him.

They were no good for each other.

Turning off the water, he drips for a few moments and slowly becomes aware of the distant sound of his cell phone buzzing on the bedside table.

Frowning, Will steps out of the bath tub, wraps a towel around his waist and then heads back into the bedroom area, pausing to stroke Duchess's soft head on his way.

'Good girl,' he murmurs, smiling when she thumps her tail in response. His smile quickly becomes a frown, however, when he sees nine missed calls from Jack Crawford.

He answers before the phone can vibrate on the next attempt.

'Been trying to reach you,' Jack says, not bothering with any preamble. 'It's about Molly.'

***

They're not my family, Will.

He runs down the corridor to the Intensive Care Unit, hating the glare of the fluorescent bulbs. Feels his eyes pulse gold as he catches a scent of Walter, distressed, and then Gracie and Danny. They're tired and scared, hungry and sad.

His children. His babies. All of them. Put in danger because of *him*.

Jack is sat with Walter and the twins. Wally is reading a book to them, signing everything for Danny. The Alpha looks up when he sees Will in the glass doors to the unit. Conflicting emotions cross his face, but he says nothing. In the end, he's just as guilty of this as Will is.

And I'm not letting them die. You are.

Will doesn't say anything to him when he enters the secure waiting area. He knows where the FBI agents and hospital security staff are located, some of them in suits, others in windbreakers, and he knows his family is safe here.

The Dragon cannot get to them now.

Walter sets the book aside and sighs. He remains on the pale couch when Gracie and Danny slip off it to embrace Will.

'Hi, sweetheart,' Will whispers, his voice choked with tears. He moves to take their seat on the couch next to Wally, who doesn't flinch from him, at least, and holds the twins close as they crowd onto his lap.

Danny is sucking his thumb again, a glazed look in his eyes. He hasn't thumb-sucked since he was a toddler.

Will brushes his brown curls back from his face and kisses his forehead, inhaling the smell of him and rocking them both gently as he shushes them.

'Your mom's in surgery now,' he says softly, speaking to Wally most of all, but knowing Gracie will also appreciate the update.

Wally frowns, looking far too old for his eleven years.

'Is there anything else I need to know, to see about Mom?' he asks, and Will's heart breaks for him.

You shouldn't have to deal with this. None of you should.

'You're all *safe* here,' he says, kissing Danny's forehead again, and then Gracie's, before offering Wally a hand and giving him a squeeze.

Wally squeezes tight.

'This crazy guy wants to kill you?'

'No…' Will hesitates, glancing at the kids in his arms. The boy beside him. He promised never to lie to them. 'Well, we don't know *what* he wants.'

'Are you gonna kill *him?'* Walter asks, and Will feels his shadow slither up behind his eyes, settling on his tongue and threatening to speak for him before he can clamp down on the urge. Before he can work out what *he* wants to say.

'No. I'm gonna catch him. They'll put him in a mental hospital so they can treat him and keep him from hurting anybody else.'

'Like Dad,' Grace says quietly, drawing a soft whine from Will before he even realizes he's made the sound.

Wally shifts, looking uncomfortable. When Will raises his eyebrows, softly and quietly urging him to speak, he says, awkwardly,

'Tommy's mom… she had this little newspaper. It said you killed a guy… and you were put in a mental hospital.'

Oh no… No… I didn't even want Wally or the twins to know about that. Not that.

'Is it… true?' Wally asks, hesitating, almost apologetic. But almost scared, too.

Scared of Will.

'Yes,' Will whispers, his voice failing him. 'Yes.' He wets his lips, wishing he could undo the past. Reverse time, like Hannibal and his teacups. The appeal has never been so strong, until

now. ‘It… bothers you. Finding that out. Because I married your mom?’

‘I told my dad I’d take care of her,’ Wally says, picking at a piece of loose skin around his nails.

‘I’ll take care of her, too,’ Will promises. ‘I’ll take better care of her than I did.’

Wally scowls.

‘Then you shouldn’t put this guy in a mental hospital. You should kill him.’ He throws Will’s hand away from him and shoves himself up from the couch. ‘I wanna watch baseball.’

Will watches him go to another seat over by the television, aching for the innocence that Walter has lost tonight. Knowing what it means that he’s watching the sport.

Danny has fallen asleep on him, still sucking his thumb. Gracie isn’t far behind, her eyelids drooping.

‘You gonna get some rest for me?’ Will whispers, easing them down onto the warm cushions of the couch when he’d just been sitting and kneeling on the floor in front of them. He removes his coat, laying it over them as a blanket, engulfing them in his scent. ‘There we go. You sleep now, pumpkins.’

‘The bad man had gold eyes, too,’ Gracie murmurs, tucking herself in close to Danny and snuffling his hair. ‘But not as bright.’

Will draws back, stroking each of their heads before leaving them to sleep. Joins Jack in the corridor outside so Wally can watch baseball in peace.

‘His team playing?’ the Alpha asks, but Will doesn’t even look, just shrugs tense shoulders and shoves white-knuckled fists into his jean pockets.

‘He doesn’t care who's playing,’ he says. ‘His father was a baseball player, a good one, died when he was six. Walter watches baseball whenever he can. Molly watches it when she’s upset.’ Then, grinding his teeth so hard they hurt, he continues, ‘He read about me, in a Freddie Lounds article. I had to justify myself to an eleven-year-old.’

‘Resentment’s raising a blister in you, Will,’ Jack warns, raising an eyebrow at the Omega’s sharp tone.

Will sneers at him, eyes no longer blue but soaked in gold. He crosses his arms, feeling the fabric scrape across the sensitive nape of his neck. Even with a square of silk sewn into his shirt, he can feel every thread of cotton pressing down into the tender flesh.

Where my crest should be.

‘Think you might lose me after this, Jack?’ he asks. ‘Think I might go back to my family?’ He nods towards the waiting room window, where they can see the back of Wally’s head as he watches a game, and the sleeping forms of the twins on the couch.

‘For a minute I did,’ Jack admits, easily. Unfazed by the challenge. Will huffs.

‘Right. And then you realized what I realized. Which is: I *can’t* go home. Neither can Molly, or Walter, or Gracie or Danny. Not until the Red Dragon is out of the way.’

By whatever means necessary.

‘As soon as Molly can be moved, we’ll put her and the kids at my brother’s house on the Chesapeake,’ Jack says. ‘Nobody in the world will know where they are but you and me.’

Will shakes his head, the gold leeching out of his eyes and leaving them icy blue.

‘Molly’s not going to want anything from you, Jack. She’d be glad to see you in hell with your back broken.’

The quiet delivery of this hits Jack harder than anything, and he remains silent as the Omega walks away.

***

It’s another three hours before Will can see Molly. He’s only allowed in for five minutes and she’s unconscious the whole time.

He has his coat back – Wally and the twins are on emergency cots in the waiting room, fast asleep under blankets.

Will enters the recovery suite, moving quietly and carefully. He looks at the bandages adorning his brave wife’s body. Her scratched and bruised face. The tubes feeding her oxygen as she lies there with wires flowing from her arms and chest.

He sits on the edge of the bed, careful not to disturb her. She has four bags of blood feeding into her. The Dragon’s bullet caught a lung. She barely made it.

What if the car had crashed? What if Molly had passed out behind the wheel? Everyone could have died. What if the Dragon had shot them all?

Broken bodies. Posed so they’re watching him violate them. Mirror shards in the eyes so they look alive.

Will takes Molly’s hand between his own, stroking it carefully. She is unmoving, the steady *bip* of her pulse on the monitor the only sound.

A tear splashes onto her skin. Then another.

I’m so sorry.

***

Dr Alana Bloom pushes the telephone trolley ahead of her as she makes her way down the corridor to Hannibal Lecter’s cell. Her Louis Vuitton heels click on the polished wood and

tile floor with every step and her gray Chanel pantsuit whispers against her sensitive Alpha skin, which is currently tingling with barely contained Rut.

She is furious. Absolutely furious.

Hannibal watches her approach from his position on his cot, perfectly at ease as he reads a book. He says nothing as Alana plugs the end of the telephone wire into the socket on the wall, connecting the line, though his irises flicker crimson when he inhales her smoky scent.

'I'm sorry to interrupt,' Alana says coldly, glaring with red-ringed eyes at her prisoner. Clasps her hands in front of her, waiting patiently by the trolley. 'You have a telephone call. It's your lawyer.' She raises a perfect eyebrow at him. 'Would you like to take it?'

Hannibal smiles, rolling his head on the thin pillow to keep Alana in his line of sight. He looks perfectly at ease, one knee bent, the other leg straight, not a care in the world.

'Did he say why he was calling?'

'I called him,' Alana replies, stepping away from the trolley and pacing closer to the other Alpha. 'To confirm that he hasn't called you. Not since you've been declared insane.'

'I could have told you that,' Hannibal says, watching from under hooded eyelids. Alana clamps down on the growl swelling in her throat and sneers at him instead, her fury like ice.

'If only I'd known to ask.'

Hannibal smirks.

'If only.'

'Would you have told me the truth?' Alana asks, tilting her head as a distant part of her – the old Beta part, perhaps – wondering where their relationship went. Where the trust went.

It shattered just as my bones did, after you had Abigail Hobbs throw me from your bedroom window.

Hannibal sighs.

'In my own way,' he says, 'I always have.'

You just didn't want to hear it.

Alana scoffs and walks back to the telephone. Presses the button to connect the call and speaks into the handset.

'Mr Metcalf, that'll be all for now. Thank you for your time.' As she kills the call, she lets the full extent of her anger show. The scent of her rage fills the room like smoke and her eyes blaze red, as do Jack Crawford's when he enters via the silently opening double doors. 'You've been talking to the Tooth Fairy,' Alana snarls, her hands balled into white-knuckled fists at her sides.

Idiot. I'm such an idiot. I should have bugged this room like Chilton said. Ethics be damned.

Hannibal narrows his eyes. He marks his place in the book and closes it, rising smoothly and walking to the table bolted to the floor in the middle of his cell.

'I think he's earned the right to be known by the name he's chosen,' he remarks. 'He's the Great Red Dragon.'

'You have hubbed hell, Dr Lecter,' Jack growls, his own rage a palpable thing. In its wake, Hannibal merely grins like a schoolboy caught stealing cookies from the jar.

'I often do.'

'You got what you wanted,' Alana sighs. 'Suddenly, you're *very* relevant.' She considers him, imagining a shark in an aquarium tank. Powerful and dangerous… but only when loose. 'There is one way for you to *stay* relevant. And comfortable.'

A reminder of her power, here. Her dominance. He has a bed and books and a toilet at her discretion only.

He has food because she allows it.

He is *hers*.

Hannibal's eyes flicker, the barest hint of bright red before pinwheeling back to darkness. Flat and dead. No hint of the emotion beneath.

He doesn't like being threatened.

'You want me to speak with the Dragon.' It isn't a question. 'Given his recent failure, you believe he will seek counsel.'

Alana doesn't ask how he knows the Dragon failed. Perhaps there's something in their body language. Perhaps it's a lucky guess.

Perhaps he never intended for the Dragon to be successful in killing Molly Graham and the children. With Hannibal Lecter, she simply doesn't know anymore. She's never had any idea how his twisted mind works.

'We need to make your contact work for *us*,' Jack says. 'Standing trace order for any time you're on the phone.' His eyes gleam. 'When he calls, you keep him on the line.'

Hannibal inclines his head, giving the offer some thought. Then,

'I can't refuse him a sympathetic ear.' His lips curl. 'He no doubt needs it.'

***

Francis is holding a pose, sweat pouring from his body as he pushes through the pinpricks of Heat to force his body into a headstand. He fights to hold the pose, but he can hear growling

from beyond his circle of light – sunshine slanting through the top window of the attic bedroom.

The Dragon circles him and Francis feels watched, he feels the primal Alpha's gaze down to his very core.

WEAK.

A terrible ringing builds in his ears, a deafening whine that climaxes in a gush of slick pouring from him just as the Dragon's red tail whips his arms out from under him. Francis lands, hard, on his shoulder, winded and hurt, terrified of the next blow.

He whines, rolling onto his front and peering around for the Dragon.

FAILURE.

Leathery wings cuff him across the face. The back. They whip his shoulders and throw him into the wooden beams of the attic walls.

Francis cries in pain and fear. He cries because he's in the middle of another Heat, but there's no relief from the ache deep inside. No relief from the inferno making his heart race, and the Dragon is so angry with him.

So disappointed.

SHALL I TAKE REBA AS MY CONSOLATION PRIZE? SHALL I BEAT YOU WITH HER INNARDS FOR YOUR FAILURE, YOU DISGUSTING OMEGA?

Francis loses great slabs of meat from his body as the Dragon flays him. He whimpers and whines, curling around himself when the Dragon punches him across the face and in the abdomen. He chokes when the Dragon strangles him, and mewls when the Dragon clamps its teeth into the nape of his neck.

YOU ARE MINE. REBA IS MINE. YOU WILL OBEY ME AND YOU WILL NOT FAIL AGAIN OR SHE DIES.

'Y-yours,' Francis whispers, barely able to speak even as he digs his fingers into the nape of his own neck, simulating the Dragon's Alphan fangs.

He punches himself again across the face, dropping to the worn rug covering the bloodstained floorboards, and beats himself over and over, his mind's eye showing him the Dragon's fist instead of his own.

'Don't do that,' he breathes, too weak and exhausted to even think of questioning his reality anymore. 'Don't… do that. Don't do that.'

DR LECTER IS NOT YOUR ALPHA. I AM.

'I'm yours,' Francis promises, his golden eyes slipping shut as he imagines the Dragon mounting him, filling him entirely and claiming him as his own. 'I'm yours.'

I WILL KEEP YOU SAFE.

***

When Francis returns the work, the Dragon wraps his wings around him in an embrace. It buffers him from the curious stares and buzzing whispers of the other staff at Gateway, who wonder how he got the cuts and bruises all over his hands and face.

Who wonder who he's been fighting, and how bad the other guy must look.

IGNORE THEM. FOCUS ONLY ON ME. FIND REBA.

The Dragon moves him to the dark room where she works, and has him stand in the darkness, his battered face shrouded in shadow. Soon after lunch, Reba returns to her workplace, her white cane clacking on the floor ahead of her. Francis waits in silence, the Dragon just behind his eyes as they watch her enter the room together.

If he doesn't break up with her, the Dragon will make him kill her. She's guilty of liking him. Guilty of wanting to put her body with his filthy Omegan one in Grandmother's bed.

It was a perverted, despicable thing for someone to do – but oh *God*, it was good.

Reba senses another person in her dark room immediately. She can feel the shift in air and smells the familiar scent, like burned sugar cookies.

'D…?' Moving further into the room, she calls for him again, hating how nervous she feels. Since when has she felt nervous around Francis Dolarhyde? He's her gentle giant. But there's just something off about the way he's sitting silently in the shadows. If he's here at all. 'D? You in here?'

Her voice quavers when she asks, and for a long while, Francis doesn't reply. He doesn't say anything, he just watches from the shadows as Reba fumbles to take her coat off, moving her face around with her blind eyes as if looking for him. Then,

'… Yes.'

Reba, thrown by his presence and odd demeanor, jumps when he answers, struggling to regain her composure.

'What are you doing?' she asks. 'Sitting here in the dark?'

'How do you know it's dark?' Francis asks, wondering if she's been lying about being blind this whole time.

LYING. EVERYBODY ALWAYS LIES. YOU CAN'T TRUST ANYBODY BUT ME.

Reba huffs a nervous laugh, still trying to come closer to where she thinks he is. What the heck is he doing? Does this have anything to do with what the women were talking about in the canteen today? About D getting beaten up?

‘The lights aren’t on,’ she says, skirting the workbench in front of her.

‘Do you remember it?’ Francis asks, feeling the Dragon move his head in a tilt. Feeling the Dragon deepen his voice. ‘The light? Is it worse to have seen it and lost it?’

Reba pauses, the question making something ache something fierce inside her chest. She even gets a prick of tears in her eyes, which she hates.

‘I know I can never have the light,’ she replies. ‘But there are things I *can* have. There are things to enjoy.’ She frowns. ‘You sound strange.’

Francis buckles, bending over and holding his aching head in his hands. Ever since the Dragon beat him back into submission, ever since the Dragon mounted and claimed him again, took him through the fires of his Heat, he’s been hollow. Confused and terrified. So lonely he wants to scream.

I’m not supposed to feel any of these things. The Dragon is my Alpha. I’m mated to him.

‘Reba,’ he sobs, tears running down his bruised cheeks. ‘I don’t know what to say to you. I… I don’t know what’s happening to me… with you. Or why. You threaten me and… you do not threaten me. It’s confusing.’

Reba feels a swell of love and pity for him and pulls him against her, letting him nuzzle against her soft breasts as he cries. She strokes his short hair, his neck, and feels the heat radiating from his nape even as he shudders at her touch. Such an unusual thing, for a Beta to be hot back here –

Francis lurches away from her, not wanting her to feel the crest that will surely be there where the Dragon has claimed him.

TEAR HER THROAT OUT.

‘It’s okay to be confused,’ Reba says, her soft voice somehow drowning out the Dragon’s roar. ‘We spend most of our lives confused. It’s rare to really figure anything out.’

She comes closer again, reaching for his face. Traces his jaw and the scarred mess of his lips. Francis’s mouth waters as he remembers the thought he had, back when Reba gave him pie.

BITE HER FINGERS OFF. SNAP.DO IT NOW.

He imagines the crunch. The coppery taste of blood. Imagines the sweet sound of her scream.

His voice drops again, and the Dragon gives him strength to do what needs to be done.

‘I can’t be with you.’

The words hit her hard, but Reba doesn’t let it show in more than a flicker of pain across his face, before carefully schooling her expression back to neutral.

‘Most men, especially Betas, are terrified of entailing a burden,’ she says, speaking from experience. ‘That fear is amplified in my case.’ She squares her jaw, lifting it up defiantly. ‘I am nobody’s burden.’

Francis sighs, shaking his head. He leans closer, his nose brushing her dark curls as he whispers,

‘That’s not why I’m afraid. I’m afraid *I’ll* hurt *you*.’

Reba’s lips thin in anger. It’s a bullshit excuse and he knows it. She feels her gaze grow cold, her face hardening, and withdraws from him as he lets her down just like all the other men she’s been with over the years.

‘It was nice to spend time with someone with the courage to get his hat or stay as he damn pleased, and gives me credit for the same. Get your hat, Francis. Get it and go.’

Turning away, she muffles the sound of her crying into her sleeve. Francis feels his eyes glow golden in the darkness, but the Dragon’s soft rumble soothes him and he knows he did the right thing.

If he’d stayed, Reba would have mirrors for eyes by the next full moon.

***

The orderly, Denise, brings Hannibal’s telephone to his cell later that day. She doesn’t speak to him, just connects the line and then slides the receiver through the metal feeding tray so he can reach it.

Hannibal waits until she has stepped away before moving to pick up the handset. He inspects it for a moment, knowing what comes next, and then brings it to his ear.

‘Hello,’ he says softly, a deep, rich Alphan purr to his tone. Inviting confidence. Providing comfort to a traumatized Omega.

And traumatized he is. On the other end of the line, Francis is sobbing. Whimpering and crying, his voice scratchy and hoarse even as it climbs in pitch to notes only an Omega can make.

Hannibal purrs, just once; a reassuring sound.

‘You are the Dragon,’ he says. ‘You don’t have to be afraid. You know who speaks. From the beginning, you and the Dragon have been One. You are Becoming. And the Dragon is your higher self.’

‘If…’ Francis pants, fighting the dizziness threatening to overtake him, fighting the confusion that saw him take six wrong turns on the way here and almost get on a bus full of old people because he couldn’t find his Momma’s old Packard car, ‘I’m not as strong as the Dragon… she will die.’

He keens; a sudden high noise of distress.

‘Don’t let fear leech your strength,’ Hannibal replies, immediately soothing.

‘I… need to think,’ Francis mumbles, his words muffling as he covers his face with his hands and scrubs at his eyes. ‘I need to think.’ He breathes out, trying to slow his racing heart. ‘I… I told her, I can’t be with her.’

Hannibal turns his back on Jack and Alana, listening to their conversation from their perch in the corner of the room. They are tracing the call, silently urging him to stay on the line. To keep the Dragon talking as the software runs the algorithm to track his location.

There’s still time.

‘You are almost blind to your own true feelings,’ he says. ‘No more able to express them than a scar can blush.’ A pause. Then, ‘Do you know how you feel about her?’

Francis gulps, his throat tight. His burned-sugar smell grows thick in the room as he thinks about Reba – her dark curls, her soft skin. Her perfect smile and her strong, scarred hands.

I am nobody’s burden.

‘Yes. I…’ *Love her.* ‘I’m afraid she will come to the house to talk. And… I don’t know what will… *h-happen* in the house. The Dragon… may come down.’

Francis slips. He twists away. Loses himself as the Dragon takes over. His voice drops. Becomes rough. Guttural.

‘I know how easily she would tear.’

His head. God, his head *hurts*. Francis clutches it, sniffing and gasping in pain. When he speaks again, his voice is softer. Higher. His own.

‘I think about what the Dragon will do to me if I don’t serve her up. I think…’ He hesitates. Loses track of the thought. His mind drifts, like stardust in the black oblivion of space. ‘She called me a man. A *sweet* man.’

Hannibal counts the seconds. The trace will be complete soon.

‘Think about Will Graham’s family,’ he says, smirking at Jack and Alana. His faithful audience. ‘Think about the weight of his wife in your arms. Think about holding her down until the loss of blood makes her heart quiver like a bird.’

‘I… didn’t hear Reba’s heart,’ Francis whispers, and Jack’s eyes flare red.

Got him.

Hannibal waits another two seconds, just enough time for the trace to be 90% complete, and then,

‘They’re listening.’

He hangs up, severing the connection and ruining their chance of confirming an exact match. It's not perfect – they got most of the way, so it'll be easy enough to find the location with the men they have on reserve – but it will give the Dragon time to escape.

He cannot deny his *mylimasis* the chance to hunt down the Dragon, after all. Will deserves the chance to kill the Omega who threatened his children.

Our children. I will bring him back to me. One way or another.

***

Three hours later, Jack Crawford walks into Dr Lecter's Baltimore office. Zeller and Price have already been there for an hour, dusting for prints and taking samples of anything that might give them a forensic hit on who the Tooth Fairy could be.

As soon as the Alpha walks into the room, Zeller stops what he's doing and approaches to give an update. He doesn't miss the way Jack's nose wrinkles and his jaw clenches as he looks around, as if the office has a bad smell instead of just a dusty one.

Being here offends him.

'The Tooth Fairy was using call-spoofing software,' he says. 'Piggybacking Lecter's old line, but the caller ID showed his lawyer's number.'

He raises his eyebrows and shakes his head, a little bit impressed by the set up. Even if he'd never admit it out loud.

Jack growls.

'Hannibal's having his *fun*.'

***

Alana makes good on her threat, stripping Hannibal's cell bare of his books, his drawings, even the bedding from his cot. She makes him watch as it happens, shackled and strapped to an upright trolley, the lower half of his face secured behind a white plastic version of the same bite-mask that Dr Chilton had developed when Will was in his care.

Two Alphan guards stand watch as an orderly boxes up the books, hands never too far from their tasers or their guns. Alana leaves them to it for a while, only returning when the large room is echoing with its emptiness.

Hollowed out, just like Lecter.

She looks up at him, a hint of a smile curling her red lips, blue eyes thickly ringed with crimson.

'You're not the only one who keeps their promises, Hannibal.' When Hannibal just turns his head to silently look at her, eyes blank and dead, colder than ice, she smells her own flash of anger at the unspoken challenge, and calls out, 'The toilet, too.'

Hannibal looks straight ahead of him again, ignoring her in favour of retreating inside his Mind Palace.

Alana may have taken his physical comforts, but she has no power over his imagination. No power over him at all.

He sinks into the silk-stitched cushions of a Baroque loveseat, sipping Chateau d'Yquem and listening to the faint, straining notes of Bach.

Will is going to come soon. And, when he does, his wrath will be wondrous to behold.

Nothing like a bit of fear to bring us closer together.

***

Color moves in waves. A soup of pixelated boxes that blur and shift into each other, coalescing into a wall-mounted television showing a game of baseball. The batter steps up, swings and hits, his bat connecting with the ball with a smack.

Molly remembers the car windows exploding around her as she drove Wally and twins away from the Dragon. She remembers the pain as a bullet entered her shoulder, nicking a lung.

It had felt like drowning.

Hospital. She's in a hospital bed. Will is asleep in the chair beside her, his head tipped back to expose the pale column of his throat. She watches him for a while, tears streaking her cheeks.

So close. I came so close to losing him. To losing all of them.

Will's nostrils flare and then his eyes flutter open, gold overtaking the blue of his irises. He sits up, rubbing at his beard, and they lock eyes across the distance still between them.

The silence is awkward. Heavy with equal parts love, guilt and rage.

Will leans forward, hugging himself to keep from grabbing hold of Molly and jarring her wounds.

'You put on baseball,' Molly whispers, her voice hoarse from where they intubated her. 'Why'd you put on baseball?'

Will shrugs, lowering his gaze to Molly's scraped, bruised hand on the pale blanket near his own calloused fingers.

'Wanted you to feel safe,' he replies, equally hushed. He looks up, jaw tightening. 'Wally's safe. The twins are safe. Dogs are fine. We're picking them up and bringing 'em in.'

Molly manages a weak smile, grateful for the reassurance. She studies Will, noting the darkness lingering under his eyes. The lines of tension in his body and the hard thin of his lips.

‘You look different,’ she says, grief swirling in her belly. ‘You said you wouldn’t be the same when you came home.’

You look dangerous. You look like the Omega I found in the trailer park all those years ago.

Will grimaces, shifting in the plastic seat. His belly is aching, a low cramp that’s probably because he’s been living on nothing but vending machine coffee and adrenaline for the last two days.

‘You said you *would.’*

‘Boy, was I wrong about that!’ Molly barks a dry laugh, fresh tears welling in her eyes. ‘I *wanted* you to go. *I* told you to go. Nobody to blame but myself.’ She licks saltwater from her lips. Shakes her head. ‘And Jack Crawford. I *do* blame Jack Crawford.’

‘Jack knew what he was doing,’ Will says, changing his self-hug to a tight cross of the arms and leaning forwards with his elbows on the mattress. He gives a shaky sigh. Then another. ‘So did I.’

Molly stares at him.

‘Is he *after* you now?’ she asks. ‘Is that why he came after us?’

Will hesitates, the gold in his eyes somehow brighter than ever. A flush creeps over his cheeks, but Molly smells the woodfire smoke of his rage in his scent when he says, grimly,

‘He came after you because *Hannibal* suggested it. He urged him to do it.’

That hits Molly harder than the bullet. She rolls her head away, blinking past bright spots to stare at the ceiling. Nausea bubbles up, but she manages to swallow it back down.

‘He sent a killer after his own *children,’* she breathes, every hair on her body standing on end. ‘For you, Will. To punish you, or impress you… or…’ A shudder. ‘That’s a clammy, sick feeling.’

Will’s very quiet. Beyond subdued. Molly can only imagine what this is doing to him. Tearing him up inside.

‘Yeah, I know it is,’ he mutters, eyes locked on the needle in the back of his wife’s hand. ‘Drivin’ me crazy trying to work out why.’

Molly grits her teeth, thinking of the Alpha that sent a psychotic killer after her children. Who continues to torture her husband, after almost killing him when they were Bonded.

I fucking hate Hannibal Lecter.

‘Wally almost died,’ she growls. ‘The *twins* almost died. *I* almost died.’ She shakes her head. ‘I knew it was him. I *knew* it was him. I saw your picture in that stupid TattleCrime paper and I *knew* it was him.’

She takes a deep breath, releasing it slowly, and groans as the tension bleeds out of her again. Offers Will a wonky smile of apology.

‘Hell, I got mad there for a second,’ she says, and they both chuckle. Molly twines their fingers together, offering her sweet man some comfort even as she waits for the pain radiating through her shoulder to settle down again.

She watches as Will tries to look at her, his golden eyes wet with unshed tears, head tilted in submission even to her and gaze dropped so he can barely see her face. He whines softly, a plaintive sound of desperation, fear and longing, and Molly wonders how she would comfort him if she were an Alpha.

‘I *hate* this, Molly,’ Will whispers, his voice quavering. When Molly just nods, he sniffs and adds, helplessly, ‘I’m *so* sorry.’

Molly takes a deep breath, trying to control her own tears so as not to add to Will’s burden. She knows he can sense her emotions anyway, and he’s already withdrawing. Overwhelmed by his Omegan instincts.

‘Erm… this could take a while,’ she admits, the best she can manage for now. She sees Will grapple control of himself for long enough to nod, his knuckles white as he clutches his arms tight for self-comfort.

‘It might.’

‘We’ll be back home,’ Molly says, trying to make it a promise, to give reassurance, but feeling so lost, so confused… and so *alone* when she looks at Will that can’t help but add, ‘… Won’t we?’

And Will… Will looks away. He looks down and away, still hugging himself, his scent souring. Molly glances at the nape of his neck, frowning at the angry red welt where the chair must have dug in, and then Will is turning back with a brisk, if unconvincing,

‘Yep. Mm-hm.’

Molly points with her chin.

‘You okay?’ she asks, prompting Will to frown and rub at his neck, at the patch of skin where his Bonded crest used to be. ‘You look sore.’

‘Oh…’ Will frowns, shuddering when he felt the heat of the skin. ‘Yeah… yeah, no, I’m fine. It’s just irritated.’

Molly sighs again. She’s exhausted. She doesn’t want to think about this anymore. Wishes this wasn’t her life. Or Will’s. Or the kids’.

I never wanted this for any of us.

‘It’s tough to hold onto anything good,’ she says softly, feeling her eyelids starting to droop. ‘It’s all so slippery.’

Will abandons his neck and holds Molly's hand again, bending down to press a kiss to her knuckles.

'Yeah… Slick as hell.'

He waits until she's sound asleep again before he leaves.

He needs to speak to Hannibal.

***

Rage boils inside him, bitter and black. Adrenaline buzzes beneath his skin, kicking his pulse into overdrive and sending heat flooding through his body. His eyes prickle as they flood with gold and his scent thickens.

You tried to kill our children. Again.

Will doesn't stop to check in at the front desk. He doesn't check with Alana that he's allowed to visit. He just strides to the top floor of the hospital's maximum security wing and approaches the Plexi-glass, met step for step by Hannibal once he sees him approach.

'I'm worn out with you, you crazy, *selfish* son of a bitch,' Will snarls. 'You're not fit to call yourself Alpha.' He pours all of his frustration and hatred into the words, and watches as Hannibal's eyes flicker red at the insult before going flat as he shuts down.

'The essence of the worst in the human spirit is not found in the crazy sons of bitches,' Hannibal replies coolly. 'Ugliness is found in the faces of the crowd.'

Will remembers, many years ago when they had been Bonded, Hannibal explaining that he sought to surround himself with only beautiful things. That he despised rudeness and ugliness, and found it deeply insulting to him.

He rolls his neck, clenching his jaw so hard it hurts.

'What did you *say* to him?'

'"'Save yourself. Kill them both. And bring the twins to me."' Hannibal's eyes flicker crimson again, his lips curling into a tiny, cruel smile. 'Then I give him your home address.'

Will slams both hands flat on the glass, making the frame shake. His growl fills the room and he sees his own eyes blazing like miniature suns in his face when he spies his reflection.

'HE COULD HAVE *KILLED* THEM!' he roars, hitting the glass again. 'YOU SENT A MONSTER AFTER OUR BABIES!'

'They were never in danger,' Hannibal insists, and Will wrenches himself away with a choked sound of disbelief, clutching at his hair.

'You're so fucking *stupid*,' the Omega moans, squeezing his eyes tightly shut to keep from sobbing. 'So stupid…'

‘I knew exactly what I was doing,’ Hannibal replies. Then, a clear smirk to his voice, ‘How’s the wife?’

Will turns back to him, his cheeks wet. He bares his teeth, shaking with fury.

‘How’s my *wife?’* he hisses. ‘She’s *lucky*.’

Hannibal’s expression sours, for just a fraction of a second, but Will knows him well enough to see the disappointment quickly hidden behind a veil of mild curiosity.

You were hoping she’d die.

‘She survived the Great Red Dragon,’ the Alpha says. ‘That takes a pinch more than luck.’

Will glares at him, his throat tight with too many emotions. Too much rage. He wants to smash down the glass wall between them and tear into Hannibal. Beat him to a pulp for what he’s done.

Bite his throat until he tastes blood and then keep biting until this madness is over.

Why can’t you just love me like you’re supposed to?

‘When you look at her now, what do you see?’ Hannibal asks, soaking up the glorious wrath radiating from Will’s face, the Omega’s fury always a breathtaking sight to behold. Will hides his emotions from so many people; to be able to read him so well, to see and understand what he feels is wonderful.

Will shakes his head, just a fraction. As if he can deny the flash of bullet-riddled bodies or ripped, bitten flesh lingering in his mind’s eye.

‘You *know* what I see.’

I see them all dead. All of them. Even the twins. Dead and disfigured. Molly brutalized by the Dragon. Mounted and raped after death.

There’s a moment, just a moment, where Hannibal’s gaze softens. Perhaps it’s the acrid stench of his distress. Perhaps the tears still shining on his cheeks. Will has no idea. He’ll never truly understand the man he was once Bonded to.

He’s not sure he ever did.

Whatever the case, when Hannibal speaks again, his voice is muted. It reminds Will of their old sessions together, when they would converse as equals, as partners, and share theories to solve crimes.

The days when Hannibal used his terrifying intellect for something good, not just cruel games.

‘Before he became the Dragon, this shy boy would never have dared any of this,’ the Alpha muses, earning a derisive snort from Will.

‘Now he thinks he can do anything.’ He shakes, first his head, then his whole body, terror and rage all swirled up in a blisteringly confusing tornado of emotion. *‘Anything.’*

‘Fear brushes the walls of your chest, circling inside you like a bat in a house,’ Hannibal says, a soft urgency behind his words. ‘Get hold of it.’

‘The Dragon’s gotten hold of his,’ Will gasps, fumbling to brace himself on the Plexi-glass, curling his fingers around the curved edge of an airhole before his knees give out.

He jolts when he feels Hannibal brush his own index finger over his knuckle – the pad of the Alpha’s digit is soft, uncalloused, and cool against his hot skin, and yet it leaves fire in its wake. As Hannibal strokes him, gently, soothing him, the fire eats away at his veins, travelling up until it can spread across his chest and fill the cavity behind his ribs, pulsing out with every beat of his trembling heart and settling like an iron on the nape of his neck.

He can barely breathe, his whole world narrowing to the point where he and the Alpha are connected.

Such a little touch.

‘The Dragon likely thinks you are as much a monster as you think he is,’ Hannibal murmurs, his voice coming as if from very far away.

Will frowns and snatches his hand back. The loss of contact feels like a bucket of ice over his head and he shudders. His shirt is damp in the armpits, clinging to his spine and scratchy at the collar, even where he’s sewn in a square of silk. To his horror, he can feel how damp the back of his boxers are.

‘Is this a competition?’ he demands, baring his teeth at the Alpha. ‘Are you *Courting* the Dragon?’

Hannibal’s eyes burn like embers.

‘“‘Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast, and one is striving to forsake its brother”,’ he replies, watching for the moment Will understands. When the Omega frowns, just a fraction, the gold in his eyes dimming enough to reveal a hint of blue as his jealousy subsides, he adds, ‘The Great Red Dragon is freedom to him. Shedding his skin, the sound of his voice… even his own reflection.’

Will frowns, but he waits patiently as Hannibal continues,

‘The building of a new body and the Othering of himself, the splitting of his personality, all seem active and deliberate.’ The Alpha’s lips curl. ‘He craves change. He craves an Alpha.’

Dead bodies lined up to watch. Mirror pieces in the eyes. Will remembers the Alpha from Lithuania, wrapped in rope, branches holding delicate pieces of broken glass as extended wings when he hung the corpse from the ceiling of the old cellar. An offering… A sacrifice.

He *understands.*

‘He… he didn’t *murder* those families,’ he says, the realization snatching the strength from his voice and leaving him swaying. ‘He *changed* them. If he changes enough of them, he’ll *become* an Alpha.’

Hannibal purrs, just once, watching the Omega shiver. Will’s eyes flood gold again and he sways, sliding his hand through the airhole until he can clutch at Hannibal’s wrist. He’s clammy, burning up with a fluttering pulse.

When they touch, the soft keening sound that he makes punches all the breath from Hannibal’s lungs and his own eyes throb with the strength of the red coloration in his irises.

Mine.

‘What do *you* crave, Will?’

Will tries to breathe. Tries to do anything but cling onto the Alpha and wonder why they’ve been apart for so many years. Children… they have children together. Hannibal’s inside his head.

We’re conjoined.

The teacup falls… Shatters. Reality breaks.

A vaulted ceiling arcs above them. There’s a skull graven into the floor. Votive candles flicker at the altar and Will’s nose burns with incense.

‘I miss you,’ he whispers, his throat aching with everything else he can’t say. All the emotions he can’t give words to. ‘I miss you so much.’

‘I’m right here,’ Hannibal promises, his musk thickening with the first hint of Rut, swelling like the tide before the moon and ready to break on the shores of Will’s consciousness. ‘You’ve always known where to find me.’

‘You put our babies in danger *again*,’ Will says, shaking his head even as he grips tight to Hannibal’s wrist, his nails digging red crescents into the Alpha’s skin. ‘You *keep* putting them in danger.’

‘The Dragon was never a threat to the twins,’ Hannibal replies. ‘I wouldn’t do that to you, *mylimasis.* Not again.’

‘I can’t trust you.’

The Normal Chapel warms as beams of sunlight flood down through the windows. In the shared foyer of their Mind Palace, Hannibal steps closer. He’s wearing a pale cream suit, his hair longer, the way Will likes it best on him, and his skin is golden with health.

As he cups Will’s face, thumb stroking across his cheekbone, Will’s eyes drop to the open neck of the suit, where he can see the thin, silver line of Hannibal’s Alphan crest down the front of his throat.

Is this even real? Am I imagining the crest because I want him back?

‘You do trust me,’ Hannibal purrs, dipping his head as he smiles at Will. ‘You always have.’

‘I can’t let myself trust you anymore,’ Will says, even as he tilts his face into the affection. ‘You’re too dangerous.’

‘“I would touch the soft edges of your existence,”’ Hannibal murmurs, moving his hand from Will’s jaw to tangle his fingers in his thick curls. ‘“And know well every curve of your mind. The delicate flesh of your heart and the passionate corners of your soul.”’

‘Alpha,’ Will breathes, closing the distance between them, aching to taste Hannibal’s lips after years of separation.

The cold surface of the Plexi-glass stops him, shocking him out of the floating, dreamlike state he’d been in, and Will stumbles backwards, clutching his burning hand to his chest.

‘Will…’ Hannibal looks, for just a second, as lost and hurt as the Omega does, before he grapples control of his emotions again and slides back the impassive mask of control. ‘Please tell Molly that I wish her a speedy recovery.’

His heart battering his ribs to dust, Will turns on his heel and runs from the room. He can’t… he *can’t*…

What the hell just happened?

Alpha.

In her office, Alana Bloom removes the buds from her ears, her pulse racing. It had taken Hannibal betraying them to the Dragon for her to install microphones in his cell. Now that she has…?

She knows Hannibal Lecter has children with Will Graham.

He has a weakness.

The Number of the Beast is 666

Chapter Summary

Jack and Will use Dr Chilton as bait in an attempt to trap the Great Red Dragon, resulting in a vicious retribution. Will is shaken by a revelation after seeking Bedelia's advice on his relationship with Hannibal.

Chapter Notes

So... first of all, I want to thank anybody that remains subscribed to this story who has been patiently awaiting an update. I am aware of how very long it has taken me to get this new chapter written and posted. Secondly, I apologise for the delays.

As some of you may be aware due to replies to comments, the delays have been due to health reasons, both mental and physical. These are still the case and so whilst I can assure everyone that this story is in no way abandoned, I can only write when I am feeling well and that there are sometimes long gaps between my writing periods these days.

Anyway, health stuff aside... I am still really enjoying this A/B/O edit and I had a lot of fun with the episode and original book chapters that went into this chapter, so I hope you enjoy what I have produced. Comments are, as always, very much welcomed and appreciated. xxx

TWELVE

The Number of the Beast is 666

You deny your love for me because of what it might mean about you.

The sleeping tablet sits heavy in his palm, dangerously tempting. Light reflects a warm amber glow from the glass of whiskey on his bedside table and Will closes his eyes for a minute, just trying to breathe.

You were as good to me as you knew how to be. Hunting with you, being Bonded to you… They were the best times I've ever had.

The back of his neck is on fire. His shirt chafes – no amount of silk lining can stop it. There's still the faintest chance that it's just irritated skin from the motel's rough cotton pillowcases or cheap laundry detergent, but none of that explains the tingling up and down his spine. None of that accounts for the tug behind his navel, telling him that his mate is too far away. That he shouldn't have run, again, when all he really wants to do is throw himself into Hannibal's arms and be held.

Could you allow yourself to love me the way I love you?

Will knocks the tablet back with a glug of the spirit, savoring the way it burns on its way down. The whiskey suffuses him with momentary warmth, making the dark shadow inside his belly rumble its approval as tendrils spread out behind his ribcage, and he shivers as phantom fingers brush the side of his neck, encouraging him to tilt his head over in submission.

He thinks he can hear Hannibal's purr when he does.

He knows he should call Molly. Check on her and the kids. Make plans to keep them safe and provide for them. Get them settled in Jack's safe house on the Chesapeake and arrange to get them some supplies.

He doesn't. Instead, he switches his cellphone to silent and strips naked, padding to the bathroom with barely a pause to scratch Duchess's head when the dog lifts it to watch him pass. Voices whisper to him from the shadows, but he doesn't stop to listen. Just flicks on the small light over the mirror and then runs himself a bath, pretending the only rushing water he can hear is from the tap and not in his mind.

Close your eyes. Put your head back. Wade into the quiet of the stream. Will… Stay with me.

His nape throbs in time with his heartbeat and slick spills down his thighs as he shivers. When he gathers it up, blinking at it in the low light, it glistens like oil. Like blood.

There was so much blood when Hannibal Cut him… When he stabbed him.

His skin is pebbled and tacky with sweat. His cheeks are burning but, if he pretends, it could be from the heat of the water. Maybe… maybe…

Will…

He knows this is a bad idea – mixing a sleeping pill with alcohol and then getting into a bath – but he doesn't care right now. God help him, he doesn't *care*. He just wants to rest, to relax, so that he doesn't dream for *once*.

I miss you so much, Alpha.

Stepping into the full tub, Will sinks down until the hot water laps over his chest and brushes his chin. He rests his head back against the rim, uttering a slow, quivering sigh as his edges grow fuzzy, bleeding into the water like ink in the rain.

Pleasure ripples through his exhausted body, radiating out from his core as his mind breaks with reality. His breath shimmers the air in front of him and he shudders, holding his hands up in front of his face and staring at the gold splinters shining through his skin. It reminds him of the veins in the teacup he shares with Hannibal in their Memory Palace, and a dim part of his mind tells him that it's in the Japanese style of *kintsugi.*

Every time he falls apart, Hannibal puts him back together again. A few new scars; a few new golden lines in the teacup.

What is created is art itself.

His back aches. Will shifts, curling forwards to try and ease the pain, and fear chokes him as he feels the skin of his shoulder-blades start to stretch and tear, spilling blood into the water. Crimson clouds curl as they sink and he snarls, baring long fangs at his own twisted, distorted reflection.

Golden cracks split his face apart. His cheek falls off, revealing the black leathery skin and milky white eye of the wendigo beneath, and then the hallucination shifts, revealing Molly lying where the bathwater was. He sees his own fractured face reflected back a thousand times over in the mirror shards where her eyes used to be. Where her mouth once whispered "sweet man" to him.

His wings unfurl, rippling red and powerful, even as his thickly scaled tail coils around her ankle, vibrant against the paleness of her skin.

He's an Alpha now, primal and raging. He is Death, resplendent, and she is his prey. She lies at his feet, a sacrificial lamb on the altar of his Becoming. Will crawls over her body, watched by the perfect mirror-sliced faces of his captive audience – his children and Hannibal – each of them placid and pliant as they silently approve him mounting Molly's cooling corpse. As they approve him sinking his Alphan fangs into the meat of her thighs, her breasts, her neck, spilling blood across the sheets as he ruts to completion, fire growing inside his belly as the beast within him roars –

WILL!

He jerks back to consciousness, surging upright from the bottom of the bath, heart hammering and lungs burning. Water splashes over the edge to soak the floor as he clutches the rim with a white-knuckled fist, a scream trapped in his throat.

His neck pulses with heat and Will whimpers as an imagined hand grips him there, soothing him.

Breathe, mylimasis.

The room shivers. Water moves all around him, lapping at his skin, seeping down the walls and dripping hot from the thicket of antlers coating the ceiling. Will cuts bloody crescents into his forehead when he clutches his throbbing temples, unable to hold back the gasping pants and mewls as he calls out for his Alpha.

Hannibal. He needs Hannibal. Now.

You always know where to find me.

Will stops himself halfway across the room, turning instead to the quart of whiskey left in the bottle and chugging it back with reckless abandon.

'Fuck you, Dr Lecter.' He thumps down, still dripping wet and naked, onto the end of the bed, almost falling off the side as his head spins and the room judders from motel beige to the flowing white curtains, frescoed ceiling and marble columns of the bedroom he once shared with Hannibal in their Memory Palace.

He wants to douse it all in gasoline and watch it burn.

Leaving the empty bottle to roll away with a chiding clink, Will stumbles back into the sopping bathroom to drain the tub. He ignores his reflection, refusing to entertain the desire itching at the back of his skull – refusing to inspect the nape of his neck.

He doesn't want to see the perfect expanse of creamy flesh where his crest once proudly stood. Doesn't think he can stomach it if there *is* something there… what it might mean.

Both versions of reality are a nightmare.

'Not my Alpha,' he mutters, surrendering to the drug and alcohol swimming in his veins. He staggers his way back to the bed and collapses, facedown, amidst a tangle of sheets and pillows, barely conscious enough to acknowledge his own pleasure as he rocks his hips and cries out at the spike of heat and sharp bliss. 'Han'bal…'

He's asleep before his pulse has even had a chance to slow.

***

'– and Mr Crawford said that I can learn to ride the ponies!'

Grace is talking a mile-a-minute with excitement, her face all lit up and blond plaits swinging as she carries the iPad around the motel room with her. Danny is hunched over the little breakfast table, drawing or writing as usual, and Will feels a pang of regret that he can't be there to take him somewhere quiet and let him get his own feelings out. Gracie can overshadow her twin, sometimes, without meaning to.

Feels more than a pang of regret that he got drunk last night, instead of calling his family and sorting supplies for them. They're getting ready to leave for Crawford's family farm somewhere in upstate New York – a safehouse off the books of even the FBI and far from the Dragon's, and Hannibal Lecter's reach. The dogs will be transported there from the veterinary clinic, now that they're fully recovered from whatever poison was used on them, and the plan is for Will to join them once the Dragon has been dealt with.

You should kill him.

‘Danny and I have our own rooms, but we still want to share,’ Gracie continues, back on the bed and giving Will a view of Molly’s haggard face as she tries to pack her own overnight bag. ‘I said –’

‘Gracie, hon, one sec.’ Will hardly ever interrupts her, so Gracie immediately falls silent. ‘Mol, should you be out of bed?’

‘Not really,’ Molly says, and there’s a sharpness to her tone that stings. ‘But Walter can’t pack all the bags himself and you’re not here, so, here we are.’

Will clenches his back teeth, anger and resentment building like an ugly storm inside his chest. When he blinks, he can still see Molly’s prone body beneath him; can still feel her cooling flesh part for his Alphan teeth as he sinks his fangs into her breasts and rip his mark into her as he mounts her before the mirrored eyes of his mate and their children.

I am the Dragon and you are my Lamb.

‘I’ll be home as soon as I can,’ he mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose and shoving the images to the dark recesses of his Mind Palace to fester and rot with the clanking of a deer skull in a copper bathtub. ‘This’ll be over soon and we can be done with it all.’

‘Sure.’ Molly blows her bangs up and off her sweaty forehead, pain and then regret rapidly twisting her features. ‘Sorry, I’m overdue my Oxi.’

‘Better go take it,’ Will says. ‘I’ve got to head out soon, anyway – got a couple meetings today. Will you call me when you guys get there?’

‘Of course.’ Molly summons a smile from somewhere and it warms him to see it, even if the edges are still tinged with regret. ‘We’ll take you on a tour just as soon as we’re settled, won’t we?’ She turns the iPad so the twins can wave at him one last time, and Will has to grit his teeth again because he has the horrible urge to scream in fear that he’ll never see them again.

‘I love you,’ he manages, hoping the screen doesn’t wobble from how much his hands are shaking. ‘I love you all so much.’

‘We love you too.’ Molly accepts a glass of water and two tablets from Wally, who barely looks at Will through the video call. ‘We’ve still got a lot to pack; I’ll message you when we’ve arrived. Be careful.’

‘You too.’

Molly hangs up first and Will stares at his reflection in the black screen for a long time after the call has ended. He thinks about the incident in the tub, about the quart of whiskey he drank and the stupid sleeping pill that he took with it.

Stupid.

His edges are frayed, loose threads unravelling the longer he’s away from his quiet life by the lake. But that’s not really the truth of it. His mind rejects it, even as he tries to tell himself the lie.

The reality is that he came undone long before the Dragon starting massacring families. Since before he starting changing them so he could transform himself. But he never felt so whole as when he was with Hannibal. Never felt so real. So connected.

I said I wouldn't be the same when I got back… can I even make it back to them, now? Or am I too far gone?

***

'Well, you've looked better.'

Bedelia shows him into her office and takes the seat across from him, a sleek eyebrow arched as she waits for him to speak. Will sifts through the myriad of emotions buffeting his senses, picking through the layers of her abrasive Alphan scent and cloying perfume until he can center himself.

'Hannibal sent the Dragon after my wife and children. Gave him my home address and told him to kill them all.'

It's as close to the truth as he can get with her, given that she can never know the truth about the twins. Can never know they're Hannibal's.

No one can.

'And how does that make you feel?' Bedelia asks, blue eyes twinkling coldly as if she knows how much the question will rile him. Predictably, Will clenches his back teeth and looks away, hands twitching in and out of closed fists against the rough material of his pants.

'Like I can't breathe,' he admits. 'Like I want to tear his throat out.' His voice wobbles, wavering as emotion catches up to him. 'I look at my wife and I see her dead. When I lie in bed, I see Mrs. Leeds and Ezra Jacobi lying where Molly should be.'

Where Hannibal should be. How did he know I took a sleeping pill? How did he reach me when I passed out in the tub?

Bedelia narrows her eyes.

'Do you see yourself killing her?' she asks, cutting right to the heart of the issue. Will flinches, but he forces himself to answer honestly.

'Yes. Over and over.'

'It's hard to predict when brittle materials will break.' The Alpha makes no effort to hide her sneer. She's thought him weak since Hannibal first mentioned him. Quite what the appeal is, she'll never understand. 'Hannibal gave you six years to build a new family, confident that he would find a way to take them from you.'

Will thinks of Molly's hesitation when she'd asked him if they would go home. Thinks of her saying how much he'd changed. How they'd both changed, and how she'd withdrawn from him because it had been *his* Alpha who had threatened her son.

He thinks of Wally, turning away from him in the hospital waiting room. Disgusted with him for having been locked up in a mental hospital and finding comfort in baseball because it reminded him of his true father. The Alpha that had kept him safe before Will had come along.

He thinks of the twins – the children he'd managed to carry to term despite Hannibal's best efforts. They haven't turned from him and they never will, he knows this to his core. But they are Hannibal's family, too; they irrevocably bind him to Hannibal by more than the bond they once shared.

They are the only true family he has left, now. The twins… and his Alpha.

'And he has,' he says, the truth like ash in his mouth.

He can never go back to his old life. He had six years of freedom from the Alpha. Six years to live his life as he chose, but now he is bound once more to Hannibal Lecter.

He'll never return to the cabin at Moosehead Lake.

I just want to hold my children again.

'Aggression can be an effective means of maintaining order in a relationship,' Bedelia comments, almost off-handed, and Will frowns as he mulls over this. The simplicity of it. The accuracy.

Hannibal always needs to be in control. He can't stand to think that Will has his own life, his own thoughts, his own family separate to him. He's like a black hole in space. Inevitably crushing and destroying everything it touches, no matter how bright the star. An endless pit, always consuming. Never satisfied.

'What's he going to take from you?' he asks, glancing up at Bedelia. The Alpha quirks an eyebrow.

'Is it important to you that he take something from me?' she replies, skirting around the question whilst circling nimbly back to the topic of aggression.

Will scoffs quietly.

'Hannibal has *agency* in the world,' he says, thinking of the Dragon. Thinking of the way Hannibal so easily manipulated the mentally ill Omega to go after Molly and Walter.

Bedelia rolls her eyes at him, a smile tugging at her mouth.

'Hannibal has no intention of seeing me dead by any other hand than his own,' she replies, coolly assured in her statement. 'And only then if he can *eat* me.' She glances down, such a tiny look, but she may as well have spread her arms wide and gestured down at herself. 'He's in no position to eat me now.'

Her arrogance is sickening. It makes something twist up inside him.

‘If you play, you pay,’ he warns, the scar on his own belly tingling as though kissed by a phantom knife.

He knew exactly how to cut me.

‘*You* have paid dearly,’ Bedelia says, and perhaps Will shifted a little at the memory of the blade. Perhaps Bedelia is just that good at reading him because she adds, ‘That knowledge will lie against your skin forever, the same way your neck still bears the scar he gave you.’ She pauses, tilting her head as she considers him. ‘It excites him to know that you are… *marked* in this particular way.’

Will frowns, unsettled by her tone. The sharpness of her gaze.

‘Why?’

‘Why do you think?’ Bedelia replies, her lips twisting into a smirk that tugs a growl up from Will’s throat as frustration with the cat-and-mouse game of words eats away at him.

‘Bluebeard’s wife,’ he snaps. ‘Secrets you’re not to know yet sworn to keep?’

He thinks back to his conversation with Hannibal earlier that morning. The reference to the old fable is still kicking around his head. Hannibal’s words, right before something had tickled the back of his mind and made him think of the way Dr Chilton had always listened to his telephone conversations. How he could tell by the distinctive click every few seconds on the otherwise quiet line.

The predictability of human behavior.

Bedelia huffs, offended by the accusation.

‘If I’m to be Bluebeard’s *wife*,’ she says, ‘I would have preferred to be the *last*.’

She quirks an eyebrow again, waiting for him to understand.

For it all to click into place. The aching neck. The itch just beneath his skin, constant, buzzing, something he cannot soothe by himself.

The way Hannibal knew he took a sleeping pill. How he woke him from a shared dream when he slipped beneath the water.

Why he can’t leave Baltimore. Why he can’t stop thinking about him.

I followed you halfway across the world. I’d do it again in a heartbeat and it makes me sick.

Will can hear his heart, thrumming against his ribs. It reminds him of the little bird in the glass jar, hopping to get free as the first drips of Armagnac began to pour, death looming and inevitable.

His nape is burning hot and tender, crushed beneath the silk-lined cotton of his shirt and jacket. He can smell his own scent, thick and sweet, edged in sour fear, and he… he *knows*…

But he needs to hear it.

‘Is Hannibal… still mated to me?’

There’s a tear welling in her red eyes as Bedelia replies,

‘“Could he daily feel a stab of hunger for you? And find nourishment at the very sight of you?”’

They are Dante’s words, spoken first by Hannibal before the *Palazzo Capponi*. Will remembers this because he dreamed he was there. He dreamed that he danced beneath the frescoed ceilings built by merchant princes and thieves of the Renaissance.

He dreamed it because *Hannibal* wanted him there.

Is he still mated to me?

For once, Bedelia’s smile is not cruel or arrogant; there is only sorrow as she adds, simply,

‘Yes.’

He feels dizzy. Like he’s standing on the top of a very high cliff, looking down at the inevitable drop. Will thinks he must be pale, even as his eyes glow like the sun. He holds very still, shock robbing him of free movement.

Still mated to me. Hannibal’s still mated to me. The cut didn’t work. It didn’t take.

I still have my mate.

He almost misses Bedelia’s next words, and then he doesn’t, all at once. He hears, over the crashing of his own pulse, the ringing in his ears, and he knows that she has her answer, even if he doesn’t say anything.

‘But do *you* ache for him?’

***

Hannibal is very careful not to touch the front of his throat, no matter how sore it has become since Will began visiting him. Alana has been monitoring him closely since he arrived and he will provide her with no reason to go after his beloved. If she were to suspect their bond were not severed as the world thinks it to be, she would deny Will access to him.

She would try to convince Will to find a way to end the connection for good.

Jack Crawford makes his displeasure over the Dragon’s attack on Molly and Walter Graham abundantly clear. He stands on the other side of the Plexi-glass wall, jaw set and chest puffed out, scent fired up with the first hint of Alphan Rut as he attempts to degrade Hannibal for his vile and vicious stunt.

‘Y’know, you claimed to love him, once,’ he says, glaring at the placid Alpha stood with his hands clasped loosely behind his back, watching him calmly from inside his cell, unbothered by what he’s done. ‘Will was your mate and you terrorized him. Again. What do you think that’s gonna do to him?’

‘Will’s thoughts are no more bound by fear or kindness than Milton’s were by physics,’ Hannibal replies, allowing a little of his derision to seep into the response. Jack still sees the Omega as both the weaker caste to protect and something he can use – a dangerous combination. ‘He is both free and damned to imagine anything.’

‘Now that he’s imagined the worst,’ Jack snaps.

Hannibal’s mouth curves into the smallest of smiles, though his eyes remain dark and flat like a shark’s.

‘Like ducklings, we imprint on those ideas that grab our attention.’

‘What’s got your attention, Doctor?’ Jack demands, his hands curling into fists into the pockets of his suit pants as he fights to remain calm despite the arrogant son-of-a-bitch stood across from him. ‘God, the Devil and the Great Red Dragon?’

‘Lest we forget the Lamb,’ Hannibal reminds him, quirking a brow. Jack frowns, fear crawling up his spine to make a home for itself inside his chest.

‘Will… is the Lamb of God?’

A sacrifice?

‘Hide us from the Wrath of the Lamb,’ Hannibal says cheerfully, and Jack narrows his eyes even as he bares his teeth in a poor imitation of a smile.

‘Who’s “us”?’ he demands, his heart suffocated in tension.

‘You, me and the Great Red Dragon,’ Hannibal explains, as if it’s obvious. ‘The Lamb’s wrath touches everyone who errs. His retribution is even more deadly than the Dragon’s.’

He can’t wait to see how Will punishes him. He welcomes any pain his mylimasis inflicts. He’ll gladly suffer if it means he can atone.

If it means he can see Will victorious.

All I want for you is complete freedom and peace and self-sufficiency. Pity has no place at the table.

‘It is,’ Jack agrees. ‘For you.’

‘The seals are being opened, Jack. The lamb is becoming a lion. “For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?”’

Jack’s eyes gleam red.

‘*I’ll* still be standing.’

Hannibal considers him for a moment. Approaches the wall and is pleased when the other Alpha holds his ground; a stubborn tourist refusing to shrink away from the apex predator locked inside a cage like the Roman gladiator exhibitions of old.

‘Is your conscience clear?’ he asks, earning a light scoff and dark brows hiking up to a silver-dusted hairline.

‘As clear as *yours*.’

‘Righteousness is what you and Will have in common. “In righteousness, the Lamb doth judge and make war.” War against the Great Red Dragon.’

War against me, perhaps. My beloved has always been hard to predict.

‘*He’s* not the Dragon,’ Jack growls. ‘*You* are. The Devil himself, bound in the pit.’

Jack’s gaze is fiery. He has a visceral rejection for their mating bond; for the time they shared together and how close they became under his so-called “care”. He’s also frustrated over Hannibal’s continued influence over Will’s thoughts and feelings; over his ability to shape him and keep him open to all the experiences of the world, not just the ones deemed appropriate by the sheltered few.

Hannibal finds himself quietly amused by the trainwreck of emotions inside the other man. His own thoughts follow neat, straight lines, and one is always bright with love for his *nakama*. Even now, he can feel his beloved like a glow in the back of his mind. Will is unsettled; displeased with something he has learned and yet dizzyingly hopeful.

Has he learned the truth of our Bond? How deep our connection runs?

‘Then that makes you God, Jack,’ he says. ‘And all gods demand sacrifices.’

Who will it be next time?

***

He won’t. He *won’t.*

Francis kneels before the framed painting in his attic room, shaking his bowed head from side to side. The Dragon whispers to him, prowling inside his skull and coiling its serpentine tail around the beating mass of his heart as he denies it again and again.

REBA IS MINE.

He reaches out. Digs his nails into the soft fabric of the Blake watercolor and scores lines across the soft paper. Where he makes jagged tears, the torn paper bleeds.

No. You can’t have her.

He claws again, feeling the sting of his betrayal. Feels hot wetness run in rivulets down his spine, between his shoulder-blades.

Where he cuts the Dragon's image, marks appear on his own flesh, scratching up the offering he has on his back. The Dragon is angry with him, punishing him for his blasphemy, but he doesn't care.

He doesn't stop.

He rips and he rips, and blood flows until the floorboards are sticky with it.

Reba will be safe from the Dragon. He'll make sure of it.

***

Alana finds him in the canteen at Quantico. Will watches from his little table by the window as she weaves her way across the room, holding a Starbucks tray and wearing a small, sad smile on her painted lips. A few people greet her, but she barely pauses to speak to them; intent on getting to Will.

'Jack called,' she says, setting one of the cups down in front of him and slipping into the empty chair opposite. 'He's running a bit late. Asked if we could meet him in his office at three.'

'Got nowhere else to be,' Will replies, shrugging as he lifts the lid off his drink to inhale the rich aroma of coffee. 'Thanks for the drink.'

Alana removes her coat and drapes it over the back of the chair, releasing a cloud of sweet rose scent across the table. It is thicker these days, layered with Alphan musk, and Will covers the smell with another drink of coffee even as it prickles his skin. Notes the way she's pinned her dark curls back, showing off her jaw and neck. A dominant move, to match the sharp lines of her three-piece suit.

She's so different from the Beta that he used to know.

Time marches ever onwards, changing us all irrevocably. Some for the better, some worse.

'How are you feeling?' Alana asks, her blue eyes narrowing as she watches him closely. 'You look tired.'

'I am.' There's no point in lying to her. She's still one of his oldest friends, despite everything. They were close, once. 'I want this done.'

'You and me both,' the Alpha agrees. 'The sooner the Dragon is finished, the sooner we can all rest a little easier.'

An awkward silence falls between them, filled with the uncomfortable truths of their past and the lingering shadow of Hannibal Lecter.

Alana is the first to break it, tapping her crimson nails against the side of her paper cup.

‘I heard Molly and the kids are moving to a safe house,’ she says. ‘How’s she doing?’

‘Physically, she’s doing well,’ Will replies, taking strength from the heat of his drink. ‘Emotionally…?’ He blows out his breath and shakes his head. ‘I don’t think I can ever forgive Hannibal for what he put her through. What he put them *all* through.’

Alana’s eyes gleam and she leans forward, reaching for his hand and holding tight even when Will flinches away.

‘Whatever anger you’re feeling towards him, it’s okay,’ she says, squeezing his knuckles. ‘He was a terrible Alpha to you. You’re allowed to hate him.’

Will smiles ruefully. If only it were that simple. Between the kids and their mating bond, and his twisted ability to get sucked so deep inside the other man’s head that he knows *why* he does every terrible thing – out of some sick sense of terrifyingly strong love – he *can’t* hate him.

No matter how much he should.

His relief over Alana’s ignorance of their bond is short-lived, though. The Alpha releases his hands, sits back in her own chair and says, over the rim of her cup,

‘Even if he *is* the father of your children.’

Will feels like he’s been punched. He can’t breathe.

No. No, no, no, no, no.

His edges shake and blur. Great leathery wings unfold. He bares his teeth and a great roar of fury erupts from his throat as he lunges across the table to rip Alana Bloom to pieces.

So much blood.

He can’t hear Alana’s next words over the sound of water in his ears. Can’t concentrate on anything but the feeling of phantom hands soothing up and down his arms, squeezing his shoulders and enfolding him, even as an invisible weight presses up against his back, like someone draping themselves over and around him.

Lips brush his cheek.

Breathe. Just breathe. I’m right here with you.

Will blinks furiously, trying to see past the hallucination of Alana, dead and bloated, with mirrors for eyes, sat across from him.

‘What did you…? Why do you think Hannibal is the father of my children? The twins are mine and Mol’s.’

Alana snorts, unimpressed by the lie.

‘Frederick Chilton may have been a sub-par doctor, but he was an excellent administrator. He always recommended a combined approach to surveillance for high profile patients.’

‘You recorded our conversations,’ Will says flatly, his eyes flaring gold at the intrusion. He’d known he was being filmed – the red light on the camera had been a steady, sometimes comforting, reminder of that at his every visit. But Alana should have notified him if she’d chosen to switch the audio recording devices back on.

‘Only since discovering that Hannibal had been colluding with the Dragon,’ Alana replies, actually sounding irritated at having to defend herself. ‘He demonstrated sufficient cause for concern that he could no longer be trusted.’

‘And me?’ Will pushes the coffee aside – he doesn’t want anything from her, now. ‘What cause did I give?’

He wonders if she’ll dare speak the words they’re both thinking. The suspicion is clearly written on her face and in the set of her jaw, holding the statement captive behind clenched teeth.

You’re his Omega.

‘I can *help* you.’ Alana doesn’t have the nerve to accuse him of still having a bond. She just reaches for him again – Alphas are nothing if not persistent, after all – and ignores the rebuke when Will shifts all the way back in his chair, folding his arms to get away from her. ‘Margot has the best lawyer on retainer; we can work out the legalities of shared custody, what that might mean in terms of visitations –’

‘What?’ Will holds up a hand to stop her, confusion bleeding into anger as he listens to what she’s saying.

What she’s assuming.

‘The twins, Will.’ Alana looks earnest, desperate, even, but there’s a sharpness to her scent that belies the expression. She’s manipulating him. Playing on his fears. ‘You and Molly are their legal guardians, for now, but Hannibal has a claim to them. He could specify another Alpha to act as a custodian if he wanted to… You could lose them.’

Will shakes his head, even as his heart begins to race.

‘No,’ he bites, his palms tingling and the nape of his neck throbbing. He can feel Hannibal like a warm presence nearby; can sense his anger at the effect Alana’s questions are having on him, and he has the irrational urge to turn inwards and soothe his Alpha. Instead, he leeches comfort from Hannibal’s presence, knowing he isn’t facing the betrayal alone. ‘He signed a contract. A will, stipulating that if he died or was incarcerated, the children stay with me. He wouldn’t challenge that. He wouldn’t do that to me.’

‘Are you sure about that?’ Alana purses her painted lips, almost sneering at him and his naivety. ‘Because there are a lot of things I think he promised not to do when he Bonded you

that he then did. And the law would be on his side if he *did* decide to challenge your custody. Because you're an Omega and your new partner is a Beta.'

Will's mouth is so dry it hurts. He doesn't know what to say – how to even process what Alana has just told him. He just shakes his head, his extremities numb.

He doesn't believe Hannibal would do such a thing. Even when Hannibal sent the Dragon to kill Molly and Walter, with instructions to kidnap the twins, it was with the understanding that Will would then hunt the Dragon down and kill him to get them back. That somehow, it would result in Hannibal and Will reuniting and raising the children together.

They're not my family, Will. You are. You and the twins.

Hannibal would never take them away from him. He wants them all to be together, sick and cruel as his manipulations are. Everything he does is, through his cracked lens of reasoning, to protect Will or help him, to keep them together or bring them closer.

You and me against the world.

'I'm not saying this to hurt you,' Alana continues, softening her expression even more. 'I just want you to know what you're up against. What your situation really is. You could lose them.'

The words rattle around his head, too horrifying to accept. So, Will doesn't. He rebukes them with a sharp shake of his head and circles back to the intrusion.

To Alana's betrayal and what he has to do about it.

To the fact that, of everyone in his life, Hannibal is perhaps the most honest with him. In his own way.

I've only ever wanted what's best for you.

'You shouldn't have recorded me without my consent.'

Alana's blue eyes flicker red before narrowing back into slits.

'Are there things you wouldn't have said if you knew?' she asks. 'I assume you wouldn't have mentioned the twins… It makes me wonder what else you might not have said to Hannibal. Secrets left unspoken between an Alpha and his Omega that could, arguably, affect this case.'

'Former Omega,' Will reminds her, clenching his jaw as his neck prickles at the lie. 'He cut off my crest, remember?'

'Hard to forget that night.' Alana's fingers tighten around the cup; it's just a fraction, but it's there. A memory of the fear. The helplessness. 'I can't imagine even *wanting* to still be Bonded to someone like that.'

You can't imagine a lot of things.

Will glances out of the window, staring at the overcast sky as his mind picks over what he's just learned. Alana is Hannibal's jailor and she knows about the children. They're at risk from her – whether through manipulation or a barrage of Verger lawyers. Hannibal is at greater risk from her than before, though Will does feel a vicious twinge of satisfaction at that fact.

Molly was right, he thinks, checking his phone in lieu of speaking to Alana again. He has nothing left to say to her on this topic. *It really is hard to hold on to anything good. Slick as hell.*

'I'm gonna head up to Jack's office,' he says, abandoning the barely drunk coffee where it is. His dark shadow swarms up inside him, sudden and vicious, and he lets some of his fury color his voice when he turns golden eyes on her and says, coldly, 'This conversation never happened. If you ever talk about, or threaten me with my kids, ever again, you won't have Hannibal Lecter to watch out for. Do you understand?'

Alana tilts her head, a small frown creasing her brown. She's careful as she rises, moving in the way someone might to avoid spooking an animal, but when she's all the way upright she narrows her eyes again.

'He got all the way inside you, didn't he?' she murmurs. 'Changed you so much you can't even see it now.'

'He didn't change me,' Will retorts, clenching his fists at his sides. 'I *know* who I am. Who I've always been. Hannibal nurtured the worst aspects, but they were always there.'

'Were we ever really friends?' Alana looks wounded, but her sorrow is for herself and Will has no space left to pity her. Not after what she's done to him. Not after the choices she's made.

Prickles of heat cascade over his skin, reminding him that he needs to take another suppressant before the hour is up. He managed to find a pharmacy this morning, willing to sell him an emergency dose of high-grade hormone and scent blockers after he explained that he was on a business trip away from his mate and trying to avoid a Heat until he got home. Stretching the truth to suit his needs, playing on the gentle Alpha's desire to protect him as he quivered and released a low, needy whine first thing in the morning, in the quiet little store.

'You tell me,' he says. 'If you'll excuse me, I have to use the bathroom.'

He leaves before Alana can argue, ducking inside the same obnoxious red restroom that Jack cornered him in all those years ago, when he first had him back in the saddle and hunting Garrett Jacob Hobbs.

If you'd just left well alone… I hitched my horse to a teaching post for a reason. Hunting killers isn't good for me. Thinking like them, day in and day out.

He shakes a suppressant out of the container and swallows it down with a slurp of the bitter water from the tap, washing sweat off his face before leaning back against the ceramic sink and waiting for the medication to take effect. Thoughts whirl around his head, too fast and

too many to count. Revelations piled on top of revelations, each more grotesque than the one before.

He's still mated to Hannibal. Still bonded to the man who tried to murder their children while they were in his womb. Children that Alana knows about. Children currently hidden away at Jack Crawford's secret farmhouse somewhere in Maryland, secure for now but feeling evermore out of his reach even as the Great Red Dragon looms in his peripheral.

And all the while, his body is crying out for his Alpha. Crying out to go into Heat and renew their mating bond. To fuck and fight and be held again so he can feel truly safe and understood for the first time in over six years.

He has no idea how long he stands there, listening to the erratic thumping of his heartbeat and feeling his skin break out into goosebumps as sweat cools down beneath the thick cotton of his plaid shirt. Eventually, his pulse slows and he comes back to himself enough that the room swims back into sight, glaringly bright and assaulting his senses.

Wiping at the moisture clinging to his scruff, Will tosses the used paper towels into the garbage and makes his way to Jack's office, a plan crystalizing in his head even as he rides the elevator up to the fourth floor.

He needs this done, now. He needs to get home to his kids, so he can keep them safe.

Whatever it takes.

***

'… We don't have anything else.'

Alana's not convinced; Will can tell even without looking at her. She's sat in one of the guest chairs across from Jack Crawford, who watches as Will paces a nervous dent into his carpet. Will keeps his hands in the pockets of his pants, hiding how much they're still shaking, but his scent is fiery and sharp, and both Alphas in the room can tell what this is costing him. Even suggesting it hurts.

He doesn't care. He can't care. It isn't their family, their children, on the line. It isn't their sanity being chipped away, day after day, night after night. They don't have to see dead bodies piled against the wall. They don't see each other ripped apart, with glass shards where eyes and mouths used to be. Chunks missing where he bit into them.

I can't keep doing this.

'Eight people dead in a month,' Jack says, and resentment tenses all the muscles across Will's shoulders and down his back, making him want to hunch and snarl in reflex to the patronizing tone. 'We can't play the long game. You know, and I know, it's the best way to bait him.'

'Got me on the hook; now you're dangling me to catch a bigger fish,' he retorts.

Jack rolls his eyes.

‘It *was* your suggestion.’

Will sneers at him, his blue eyes thickly ringed with gold when he locks them onto the Alpha’s face.

‘And you’re *thrilled* you didn’t have to make it.’

He can see the fury lurking behind Jack’s eyes; the tightness of a choked-back rebuke lingering in the lines around his mouth, but before the Alpha can say anything else, Alana speaks up, coolly disapproving.

‘You once fooled yourselves into believing you were in control of what was happening. Are you still under that delusion?’

Behind the sound of her voice, Will can hear the trickle of water whispering for his attention. He turns his head, curious to find its source, even as heat skitters up his spine to settle like a brand on the back of his neck.

The room shakes and his darkness slithers out through every vein. Mirror shards pierce the delicate flesh around Alana’s eye sockets, reflecting his own distorted image back at himself, and blood dribbles down her ruined face. She is serene in death, but the fire inside him is raging, snatching his breath.

Will…

Sharp pain pierces his skull. Will rubs at his sweaty temple and turns away, trying to hide how fast and shallow his breathing has just become. He manages to swallow, feeling sick, and forces words past tingling lips.

‘The, um… Dragon has a certain… *biological* curiosity about me… He either views me as a potential mate or as a threat. All psychopaths are narcissists; they love to read about themselves. If you were smart, Jack, you would use Freddie Lounds.’

‘She will need to interview you, Will.’ Jack actually has the good grace to sound concerned. Perhaps he can smell how distressed he is. Maybe he’s just worried Will’s going to ruin the whole thing by being too aggressive or disagreeable. It’s hard to tell. ‘Take your picture.’

She already fucking has, Will thinks. *That’s what drew the Dragon after me and the kids in the first place.*

‘I’m in it now,’ he says aloud, his voice shaky. ‘Can’t go home as long as he’s loose.’ He shakes his head again, turning back towards Jack from where he’d instinctively moved away. ‘So, I *really* bad-mouth the Red Dragon in TattleCrime… give him a shot at me.’

‘It’s gotta be a really good shot.’ Jack sighs through his nose. ‘What about the set-up?’

Will shrugs, thinking aloud even as his brain whirs with a dozen other possibilities, each track leading back to a sheet of Plexi-glass keeping him impossibly away from his mate.

Alpha.

‘Something open… Someplace where he can get close to me.’

‘It feels like a trap to me,’ Alana says, shaking her head. ‘And it’ll feel like a trap to him.’

Will knows it does. That’s why he’s saying it. So *they* can be the ones to suggest what he *really* wants to do. He just has to be patient enough that they –

‘Unless you have a professional voice who will legitimize what you’re saying.’

When she adds that last part, Will blinks in surprise. He hadn’t expected it. Hadn’t anticipated it. But he rolls with it, giving an easy shrug. He can feel his body cooling now. Can feel a veneer of control sliding over him and he surrenders to it because it’s so much better than what he felt before.

‘Someone to hide the wire of the snare?’ he suggests, mulling it over. He turns to her and smirks, his eyes flashing gold with challenge. ‘Are you volunteering?’

Alana scoffs a smile.

‘No. I’d have to be a fool.’

Will arches an eyebrow between her and Jack.

‘Well… do we know any fools?’

***

Frederick is always such wonderful entertainment when he visits. Hannibal had been deep inside the recesses of his Memory Palace, enjoying the cool shade and scent of incense lingering in the Basilica of San Lorenzo when he had arrived, but his indignation and the stink of fear rolling off him through the air-holes in his glass wall had intrigued him enough to draw him out.

The weaker Alpha doesn’t disappoint. His left eye betrays its damage as the lens dulls the red of his irises. His dentures click when he grinds his jaw.

He tries to hide it all, of course. Standing there in his two-thousand dollar suit, dark hair slicked back with designer pomade and wearing just enough cologne to offend enough Betan sensibilities. He tries to strike a casual pose, as though he is the one in charge, as if being on one side of the glass is enough, and waves a psychiatry journal through the air with the air. The glossy pages slice through the rut-thick air like a knife.

‘Since your commitment, you have written some brilliant articles for *The Northern Medical Journal of Psychiatry.*’

Hannibal smirks, watching him from the middle of his cell with his hands clasped in front of his body. He would prefer to be in front of a *Botticelli*, or gazing at *Jesus Pantocrator,* but this is entertainment enough for now.

‘Thank you, Frederick.’

‘I just finished your most recent piece.’ Frederick waggles the offending journal, a vein throbbing in his temple as his pulse rachets up a notch. ‘Extraordinary stuff!’

‘A particularly good one,’ Hannibal agrees, his own eyes glinting with maroon amusement.

‘It may be my favorite,’ Frederick spits, pacing off to the side. ‘I have seen a *lot* of hostility… but this was quantifiably *bitchy!’* He shakes his head. ‘Do you think I am your nemesis?’

‘Nemesis?’ Hannibal chuckles at the idea of it. Frederick isn’t worthy of the title. ‘No.’

‘You refuted my entire book!’

A delicate shrug. Barely enough to rumple the seams of his prison jumpsuit.

‘It didn’t hold up to scrutiny.’

‘Of course it didn’t – I was lying!’ Spittle flies from his lips as Frederick snarls at him, but he reeks of fear. Fetid and thick with salt. ‘On *your* behalf! To save your *life!*’ Another quick step, hands shaking where he clutches the glossy magazine. ‘You *refuted* your insanity defense. I went out on a *limb* for you and you climbed up there and *sawed* it off!’

Papers *thwick* together as he emphasizes the point with a frantic gesture. It really is quite amusing.

‘“Wood burns because it has the proper stuff in it, and a man becomes famous because he has the proper stuff in him.”’ Hannibal tosses the words out like a baited line, waiting a moment before adding, with a cruel twist of his lips, ‘You don’t have the proper stuff, Frederick.’

Frederick is positively shaking with rage as he rolls up the magazine.

‘*I* am a best-selling author!’ He glares past his white-flared nostrils at the other Alpha. ‘The journals only still publish your writing for the *freak* value of your by-line.’

He shoves the journal through the nearest airhole and chances a sneer at Hannibal as the magazine plops to the ground and unfurls, showing the incarcerated Alpha’s own face printed in hues of gray and blue. Serene as he is now, with menacing lingering in the shadows of his eye sockets and around the line of his mouth. A shark, waiting in deep water. And Frederick is flailing.

‘The attention given to you is dwindling,’ the smaller Alpha continues, grasping onto oily words that he foolishly believes will act as insult to higher intelligence. ‘Since you have been overshadowed by another creature.’

Oh, Frederick… Such an obvious hand.

Hannibal allows his lips to curl into the faintest of smiles, and his eyes glint as Chilton bends to the air-vent to add,

‘That book is writing itself. I think I’ll call it *The Dragon Slayer*. All I need is the ending.’ He straightens, clearly displeased by the reaction, and Hannibal relishes his irritation as he replies,

‘Fate has a habit of not letting us choose our own endings, Frederick.’

‘This is the ending fate has chosen for *you,*’ Dr Chilton sneers, letting fear get the best of him. His eyes burn like embers as he drawls derision through the Plexi-glass keeping him safe. ‘Your teeth will go and so will your strength. Nobody will be afraid of you anymore.’ He tips his chin up, talking down to Hannibal. ‘After Dr Bloom’s reign, you will be out in the ward. The young Alphas will push you around and use you for *sex*. All you’ll get to read is what you write on the *wall*. You have seen the old ones… yes?’ A smirk. ‘They *cry* when they do not like the stewed *apricots.’*

Hannibal says nothing. He can feel Will’s mind nudging the edge of his own, fingers tugging at the rusted padlock sealing shut the trapdoors to the bowels of his Memory Palace, where his rage coils like a great serpent, venomous and deadly. He applauds his beloved’s tenacity, but a resolute nudge has him rebuffed and sent back to the Normal Chapel foyer, to bask in the safety of sunlight and incense.

Frederick visibly chaffs at the lack of a rise, and stomps over to his leather briefcase.

‘Oh,’ he adds, popping open the clasps to pull out a copy of *Hannibal the Cannibal.* ‘I’m just going to leave an extra copy of my book… right over here.’

In the shared connection of their mind, Hannibal feels Will slip the hold he has on him and break free of the foyer. He senses him examine the last few minutes, feels him experience a ghost of Frederick’s supposed power over him, and – for the first time since his incarceration – he despises the cell in which he is kept.

He doesn’t want Will to see him as weak.

‘Thank you, Frederick,’ he says, the words distant to his own ears as he concentrates his efforts on soothing his agitated mate.

‘I’ve personalized it for you,’ Frederick adds, smirking again.

Hannibal feels Will bristle, and he swallows the urge to purr at how protective the Omega is of him. Something must show on his face, of course, because Frederick straightens out his jacket and leaves, visibly shaken at not having won their little round.

Poor Dr Chilton… he just can’t win, can he?

Will withdraws without giving him the satisfaction of an answer, and Hannibal chuckles to himself before wandering over to collect the journal left on his cell floor. He might as well have a read before it is confiscated.

***

Frederick pulls up short in the corridor outside Hannibal's cell room, sighing through his nose when he sees Alana Bloom leaning against the wall with her arms crossed.

'Are you here to remonstrate me with "I told you so's?"' he snipes, adjusting his sweaty grip on the handle of his briefcase.

Alana gives him a small smile, on the edge of condescending, and shakes her head.

'That's not why I'm here… Jack Crawford and Will Graham have a proposition for you. Concerning the Red Dragon.'

***

They agree to meet in a hotel room that afternoon. When Frederick arrives, he's surprised to find Freddie Lounds sitting on one of the plush couches, notebook in hand, and gives voice to his confusion, glancing between Will's pale, pinched face and Jack Crawford's hard one.

'She's here because we need someone who's less concerned about the truth than the best story,' Jack replies, ever the alligator. 'Dr Chilton, you just lay out your theories and Will will aggravate them for the record.'

'You're making statements no investigator would ever make and no straight newspaper would ever credit,' Freddie says, confirming everyone's suspicions for the room at large.

'You're not a straight newspaper,' Will replies, walking behind her with his hands in his pant pockets before coming to a stop behind the other end of the long L-shaped couch to frown down at the red-haired Alpha. 'You sell t-shirts that say: "The Tooth Fairy Is A One-Night Stand."'

'I can get you one if you like,' Freddie replies, her eyes glowing red with animosity, even as she tilts her head up at him and flashes her teeth in a smile. 'You a small or a medium? Small, I bet. Most 'megs are. They aren't selling so well since you started calling him The Dragon.'

'The killer's objection to the name "The Tooth Fairy" is likely grounded in the Omegan implication of the word "fairy",' Dr Chilton comments. 'Tedious, I know, but if you really want to piss him off, that's what you should call him.'

'Very well.' Crawford nods. '"Tooth Fairy" it is.'

Freddie sets up her microphone, a sleek, expensive thing with a single red light to indicate recording has commenced. Will watches the crimson eye and feels sick.

Dr Chilton unbuttons his suit jacket and settles himself in an armchair, one leg crossed over the other. He looks the picture of ease and authority, and he speaks with confidence, even as Will stalks around behind him, shoulders tight with tension.

'The Tooth Fairy's actions indicate a projective delusion, compensating for intolerable feelings of inadequacy. Smashing mirrors ties these feelings to his appearance –'

'Not only is the Tooth Fairy insane; he is ugly and impotent.'

The Omega's interjection startles both Alphas, and Frederick turns in his seat to look up at him. Will arches an eyebrow and Frederick wets his lips before fumbling to continue,

'Th-there is a strong bonding of aggressive and sexual drives that occurs in sadists at an early age –'

'He's a vicious, perverted, sexual failure,' Will says, his eyes glowing with furious gold. 'An animal.'

Both Freddie and Frederick raise their eyebrows at this, but Will really doesn't care right now. He wants the article to be inflammatory. He wants the Dragon to be pissed off. He wants rage to cloud his judgment and make him sloppy.

Frederick turns very deliberately back to the microphone.

'The savage acts aimed primarily at the Omegas and performed in the presence of the families are clearly strikes at a maternal figure –'

'The Tooth Fairy is the product of an incestuous home.' Will almost chokes on his own words, but he forces himself to say the poison anyway. It's the only way.

Frederick's eyes flicker red and his expression turns sad. When he speaks, his voice is softer than before. Filled with remorse and sympathy.

'This is the child of a nightmare.'

Will looks at him. He has no retort. No barb to add. He just feels the keen sting of that parting statement like a knife to the gut.

The Dragon was a child, once… an Omega, raised in an abusive home. So desperate to be bonded to an Alpha that he began murdering families in order to become one himself. To change his own biology through acts of pure violence so that he would be worthy of love.

Jack's voice cuts through the buzzing in his ears.

'Will, I think we need a key shot of you here in your "Washington hideaway".'

Freddie grins and rises from her chair, flashing red eyes and white teeth at Will as she says, her voice gravelly with a lecherous purr,

'I'd *love* something of you in a bathrobe… sitting at a desk… it could fall open a bit at the neck… you could be poring over this artist's conception of the Fairy.'

She shows him a sketch of The Tooth Fairy, smirking at the blush raising a pink stain high on his cheeks. Will crushes the urge to snarl at her and hopes his scent isn't too choked with the salty-sweet scent of fear-laced embarrassment.

Bitch.

‘I’ll stand by the window,’ he mutters, turning away as Jack shakes his head at the uncouth Alpha. Chilton, to his credit, looks uncomfortable at the exchange, though his expression has remained troubled since voicing the opinion that the Tooth Fairy was raised in a nightmare.

Will just hopes he isn’t going to chicken out before the article is finished. They need this. *He* needs this. He’s running out of time.

‘Just, er, make sure you can see the fountain and the Capital Dome,’ he says, pointing out the key features beyond the net curtain. ‘The Red Dragon needs to be able to find this place, if he wants to.’

As everyone begins to assemble by the window, Freddie with her expensive camera at the ready, Dr Chilton rises in accordance with social cues. Will turns to him and graces him with the smallest of smiles, his eyes cold.

They cry when they do not like the stewed apricots…

There’s a whisper of something in the back of his mind, a hint of hatred that’s his own and yet not. But Will has plenty enough reason to despise Dr Frederick Chilton; the spoiled brat of a psychiatrist who imprisoned him for months, who muzzled and shackled him… who should really know better than to trust any of the people in this very room.

‘Frederick,’ he says, his voice like honey. ‘Would you like to be in the photograph?’

Bait. I want him as bait. The Dragon always kills the pet first. And Chilton is my dog on a leash.

Chilton grins at Jack, who returns the smile tightly.

‘One for the dust jacket,’ the doctor says, moving to stand obediently beside the Omega in his seafoam green shirt and cord pants. Jack places himself behind Freddie, adjusting her with a few instructions and corrections – “up, that’s it, there” – until she’s in position and Will places his hand between Frederick’s shoulder blades.

It’s a dominant move; one normally reserved for Alphas with their Omegas. Frederick glances over at him, startled by the role-reversal, but he forces himself to settle when Will doesn’t acknowledge him. And then the lens clicks, securing the photo into immortality, and there’s nothing anyone can do to stop it.

When he looks back at the image, Will might think how much like Hannibal’s his expression is. Flat. Calculating. Cold.

Dead behind the eyes.

‘You shouldn’t have done that,’ Frederick says, shrugging Will off the moment Freddie lowers the camera. ‘It’s not proper.’

Will can tell by the scents in the room that all three Alphas are unsettled by his action. Good.

‘That’s why I did it,’ he says. ‘Everyone knows the Tooth Fairy is an Alpha. If he sees me doing that to you – touching you like that – he’ll be just as angry. It’ll rattle him. Might make him want to put me in my place.’

‘Sure makes me want to put you in your place,’ Freddie says, smirking at him. A warning look from Jack silences her.

‘What now?’ Crawford asks, drawing everyone’s attention to him. ‘How soon can we get this thing out?’

‘I’ll have it ready by this evening,’ Freddie says, packing her bag again. ‘By nine o’clock, it will have hit the newsstands. By midnight, it’ll be all over the internet.’

Jack’s smile was grim, his eyes hard.

‘Good.’

***

THEY MUST PAY.

The Dragon’s voice rumbles inside his skull, jostling his bones as his van idles at a stop sign. Francis grips tight to the steering wheel, his knuckles white beneath the scarred flesh, and he glances down at the copy of *TattleCrime* that he bought at a gas station a little while back.

Ugly. Impotent. A vicious, perverted, sexual failure.

On the front cover of the magazine, Will Graham stands with his pet Alpha, Dr Frederick Chilton. They are strategically placed before a hotel window, overlooking the Capital Dome. Graham looks like an abomination of nature – the Omega gold of his eyes at odds with the dominant gesture he has adopted, with his hand on the Alpha’s back.

He is wrong and he must see that. Francis must make him see… he must make them all see.

I WILL MAKE THEM UNDERSTAND.

He turns left onto the interstate and hits the gas.

***

‘This whole procedure is too passive for my taste,’ Crawford grumbles, taking an evening stroll with Will around the fountain in the courtyard below his hotel room. ‘We’re playing games in the dark of the moon.’

‘Well, he thinks he can do anything.’ Will shrugs, keeping an eye out for the sniper’s vantage points and always aware that the Dragon could attack at any moment. ‘Maybe he thinks he can stop.’ He glances at Jack, noting the skeptical arch to his eyebrow and shrugs. ‘If he can hold off until he catch him, maybe we can help him make it stop.’

‘He almost *killed* your wife and kids,’ Jack reminds him, skeptical as to how the Omega can so easily forgive another of his caste after what he’s done.

Will snorts and shakes his head.

‘No. *Hannibal* almost killed them,’ he replies. ‘Molly and Walter, anyway.’

Jack studies him for a moment longer, sorrow etched into the lines of his face. Then,

‘Alright. Well, pedestrian traffic falls off around 7:15. You should go for a walk around 8:30 or so. He’ll have to cross open ground to get close.’

‘Oh, he’ll wanna get close.’ Will’s shadow unfurls in his chest, wings rippling before it coils tight in anticipation of a fight.

‘I’ve got snipers with night vision on the roofs. You’ll be wearing body armor.’

Will turns to face him, a wry smile tugging at his lips because really? Body armor?

‘Seven out of eleven times, he’s gone for the headshot, Jack.’

Jack, at least, has the grace to grimace.

‘Yeah…’

There’s nothing else to say. Will’s either going to make it out of this alive, or he won’t. One way or the other, the Dragon is coming.

***

The hotel parking lot is in the sub-basement. The elevator pings as the steel doors slide open and the two FBI agents protecting him flank him, one in front and one behind as they escort him to the black standard-issue SUV that they will be driving him back to the airport in.

‘That’s absurd.’ Chilton scoffs down the line at the interviewer from *Psychology Weekly.* ‘That’s not what I said at all. Dr Lecter gave me misleading answers in my interviews. I will refute his refutations in my new book *Blood and Chocolate*. Supermarket tabloids love Hannibal Lecter more than alien abductions. *That* is his demographic now. We know who his fans are –’

He’s so busy prattling away that he doesn’t even notice the agents have been shot dead after settling him into the car, taken out by two perfect headshots. It isn’t until two strong hands, encased in black leather gloves, grip hold of his peacoat and yank him from the backseat that he realizes he’s in trouble.

But, by then it’s too late. By then, a chloroform rag has already been stuffed across his nose and mouth, choking him into unconscious.

He kills the pets first.

***

He wakes slowly. His mouth is dry and tastes bad, like chemicals and stale spit. His eyes are stuck down, keeping him blind, and he can tell there is something over the top of them, acting as a blindfold. Confusion is the first thing that he feels, his mind too muddied with the after-effects of the chloroform to summon fear.

Frederick shifts, stirring groggily as the Dragon peels a sanitary napkin from his eyelids. More have been twisted together to form a makeshift gag but he barely makes a sound as it is tugged from his slack mouth.

He reacts when pure Omegan hormones are wafted under his nose, though – rearing back with a choking gasp, his eyes flooding red as every nerve fires back to life with searing pain.

God… fuck… where am I?

'Would you like a blanket?' The voice he hears is a low, harsh mutter. Not something he'd expect from a hospital attendant or paramedic. The hand, when it touches his bare shoulder, is hot as any Omega's. 'I'll get you a blanket.'

Footsteps recede and Frederick tries to will the sluggishness from his body. Tries to gather the thoughts that press against the edges of his clouded mind. Awareness is creeping back in, slowly seeping through the haze created by the chloroform, but not quick enough.

He flinches when a thick, soft blanket is draped around his bare shoulders and across his chest, providing warmth and imitating comfort. The fabric still carries the scent of Omega on it, though the smell is twisted and bitter, grating across his tongue in a way that makes him want to gag and withdraw.

Wrong.

The flinch makes him realize just how much he *hurts* and in his addled state, he gives voice to the fears crowding his skull.

'Oh… my back… *hurts*. My *skin*… Did I get burned? I hope to God I am not burned.'

He can't move. Why can't he move? Why can't he raise his arms? Shift his legs? Has he broken his spine? Has he been braced? This doesn't smell like a hospital… sound like a hospital. Where *is* he? His skin is on fire. Itching and stinging. He wants to scream with it. He needs it to stop. *Stop*.

'Burned?'

The voice comes from behind again; the low, menacing growl of an Alpha.

Francis can feel the Dragon taste the word, rolling it around his tongue as it considers the idea. He sits on the worn couch behind Dr Chilton, concealing his face with a gray mesh mask, his naked body covered in a green silk kimono. His skin is thrumming and oversensitive, his blood hot in his veins, but the Dragon keeps a tight leash on his errant hormones.

BURNED?

‘Burned…’ He rubs his fingertips together, imagining the fire of a struck match. The heat of it. The smell of melting flesh. ‘No.’ He glances over at where he’s placed the Alpha glued to one of Grandmother’s wooden wheelchairs, facing the wall in the corner of the room like a child who has misbehaved.

So many hours spent in that corner, told to think about how weak and disgusting I was for the damp patch in my pants and the feverish need that would take over every six months. Dirty little Omega. Weak. Selfish. A burden.

‘You just rest there.’

‘What… am I doing here?’ Chilton manages, blinking again to try and clear his vision.

‘Atoning, Dr Chilton.’

Atoning…? Frederick’s sluggish brain finally picks up the rest of the pieces and he realizes, with a dawning sense of horror, that this is no hospital.

This is about the article. Will Graham’s article.

The Tooth Fairy’s article.

Panic claws at his throat, trying to choke him. When he tugs his arms, he can feel the glue sticking him to the wooden frame of the chair. Can hear its wheels rattle against a tiled floor.

Oh god… oh god… oh god… Please… I don’t want to die like this.

‘I… have not seen your face,’ he pants, almost breathless with a terror that he’s struggling to get control of. Tears leak from his glowing red eyes, mingling with snot and cold flop sweat on his upper lip, but he couldn’t care less right now how he looks. He just wants to survive and escape. ‘I… I could not… could not identity you. I… I do not know what you look like.’

I don’t know who you are… just let me go. Let me live.

The terrible voice comes again from behind. Low and menacing, sending shivers up and down his sore, blistered back.

‘Do you know *who* I am?’

‘No,’ Frederick gasps. ‘No. And I do not want to know, believe me.’

A small pause. Then,

‘According to you, I am a vicious, perverted sexual failure. An animal.’ Francis glares over at him from behind the mesh, hearing the way the Alpha stutters out a terrified sob. ‘You know now, don’t you?’

Chilton's head is spinning. He's almost sick. This can't be happening to him, can it? Not him. This is all a bad dream from which he'll soon wake up.

'Yes.'

'Why did you lie, Dr Chilton?' the Dragon asks, keeping him grounded in his terrible nightmare. 'Do you *understand* what I'm doing?'

The voice gets closer. Chilton can't help but shudder, even though moving causes his skin to tear and bleed.

'No… no!' He thinks fast, trying to find a way to survive. To keep him talking so he can find a way out because the FBI must surely already know he's missing and will be looking for him. They'll find him and rescue him. If he can distract him, he can get out of this. 'But… I think I have an opportunity to understand. And… then *all* my readers could understand, too.'

'Do you *feel* privileged?'

No.

Francis chokes back the answer that comes to mind. It's not helpful to be honest, after all.

'It is a privilege,' he says. 'But… but… I have to tell you… I am scared. Alpha to Alpha… I am scared.'

It's pretty fucking obvious, but if there's even a shred of humanity left in the creature behind him… If he can appeal to any sense of decency at all… He doesn't care what it takes. Just as long as he survives.

Francis thinks he would have felt a warm flutter in his belly when Dr Chilton says that. "Alpha to Alpha…" What a nice thing to hear, after he's been waiting for so long.

But the other man is still talking. Still stammering and stuttering away, and so he leans over him from behind, creeping around because he wishes to hear more.

'And… it is very *hard* to.. er… to *concentrate* when you are scared.' Francis can barely hear himself. His ears are buzzing. He might be sick. He might already have been sick, he doesn't know. Has he pissed himself?

Is it over yet? Please, dear God… just let it be over.

'If you have got a great idea,' he babbles, 'you do not need to scare me, for me to be impressed, okay?'

He keens, high and long like a goddamn *'Meg* when the Dragon growls right in his ear. He hadn't even realized he had come back, let alone crept right up behind the chair again.

'"Alpha to Alpha"?' Francis might once have craved the acknowledgement of the stronger caste, but the Dragon is not so weak and not impressed by the pathetic attempt at

appeasement. ‘You use that phrase to imply frankness. But you see, I am not an Alpha. I have become… *Other*. And *More* than a Alpha.’

The Dragon rises to straightness, staring ahead from behind the mesh facemask. Dr Chilton cowers in his chair beneath, whimpering and shaking like a beaten dog.

‘Do you think *God* is in attendance here?’ He cups his hands around the Alpha’s head, hoping to sense the thoughts clattering around the inside of his skull. ‘Are you *praying* to Him now?’

Frederick doesn’t know what to say. Should he admit that yes, he is desperately praying to be saved? Will that anger the Dragon? Make things worse? Or does the Dragon *want* him to be praying?

‘We… pray to God mostly when we are scared,’ he says, erring on the side of caution. It hints at what he’s doing, without admitting to anything. Somehow, though all the fear clogging his neurons, he can still think of something.

The Dragon lowers its hands, disappointed. There is nothing. No sound and certainly no answer.

Nothing.

‘And does *God* help you?’ he asks, already knowing the answer but wanting to hear what this man has to say about it.

Dr Chilton slumps a little, the smell of fresh salt tears drenching the air.

‘… N-no… I don’t know… I do not know… I don’t know… I do not… I do… I ought… I do not think about it after… I ought to.’

‘You ought to.’

‘I ought to.’

‘There are *so* many things that you ought to understand,’ the Dragon says, rocking the Alpha gently in his chair. Back and forth, back and forth. Savoring the soft weeping sounds bubbling up from past tightly clamped lips. ‘And in a little while, I will help you understand.’

Oh God… Jesus… Frederick’s world is moving… Just a fraction… A little at a time… It’s making his nausea so very much worse… His stomach rolls, twisting and cramping…

If it doesn’t stop, he’s going to vomit.

And then it gets so much worse, because the Dragon turns the chair around. He turns it *around* and terror spikes. The room comes into view; a dark-paneled drawing room with old furniture and moth-eaten drapes, right before he slams his eyes shut.

‘No!’ he screams. ‘I do not want to see your face!’

‘When you turn around, you will open your eyes and look at me,’ the Dragon says, breath brushing his cheek with how close he is. ‘Or I will *staple* your eyelids to your *forehead*.’

Frederick can’t breathe. He can’t… he’s gasping for air, sucking it in, but –

He jolts when the Dragon pokes him in the forehead and opens his eyes as instructed. He doesn’t want his eyelids to be stapled.

The Dragon’s face is covered right now, concealed in dark grey mesh. His muscular body is wrapped in a lime green silk kimono – the sort of thing an Omega would wear, because of the v-neck at the back and the slippery fabric against their skin – but it doesn’t fit well because of his bulk.

He notes all of these things quickly, just as he notes the bite marks, cuts and bruises across the pale flesh, right before he homes in on the scarred lips revealed as the Dragon peels the mask upwards.

And then the sweet, burnt-sugar musk of an ill Omega hits him and he falters. Stares with his own mouth open, so utterly confused because… because… and this is a…

How could this possibly be…?

The doorbell rings, interrupting them both, and Frederick turns to look towards the sound – is it his salvation? – just as the Dragon does.

Maybe it’s his Alpha, Chilton thinks. *He’s clearly sick. A sick, demented Omega… But I can reason with another Alpha.*

‘D?’ Reba’s voice rings out from the hallway and Francis freezes up, fear making his heart pound fast inside his chest. ‘It’s me.’

The Dragon moves quickly, turning Frederick and coiling around him to hiss into his ear,

‘If you make a *sound*, I will *kill* her.’

And then he goes to answer the door.

***

Reba is stood on the other side of the glass, but she can tell when D approaches. She waits for the tell-tale clicks of the heavy lock being opened and when it doesn’t come, she gives a small sigh.

Things are still not great between them.

‘I don’t like surprises,’ she says, speaking clearly so she can be heard through the pane. ‘I bet you don’t, either. I tried to call you. May I come in?’

A pause. And then the bolt clicks back. The handle twists. D opens the door to her.

She speaks again as she crosses the threshold.

‘I won’t be long. I asked my taxi to wait. How are you feeling?’

Francis stares at her. The Dragon stares at her. They are One, now… but there was a time when Reba was his own.

He doesn’t know if he wants that feeling back. He doesn’t know anything, anymore.

STUPID BOY, the Dragon growls, nails raking his back. *YOU NEVER DID.*

‘Okay,’ he manages, trying not to let too much of the Dragon’s guttural snarl seep through into his voice. Reba cannot know, after all. To her, he is only D. The sweet, mild-mannered Beta, who broke her heart.

‘Your office said you were sick?’ Reba asks, and now the Tupperware tub of liquid in her arms makes a bit more sense. Francis just hopes there are no rumors floating around work that it’s “his time of the month” or any other Omega crap.

‘Um… the flu,’ he manages, and perhaps the scratch in his voice will be mistaken for a sore throat. Perhaps the whisper of fabric against his nose will be mistaken for stuffiness. ‘You shouldn’t be here.’

‘I brought you soup,’ Reba says, holding out the tub. Francis takes it – his Grandmother raised him right, after all – but she doesn’t leave, then. She goes further into the house, following the familiar sounds of the ticking clock and music drawing an audio path to the drawing room.

Frederick Chilton sits glued to his wheelchair in the corner of the room. As she steps into the room and he sees that she is blind, the hope that had flared dies, replaced by dread.

‘I… I didn’t come just to give you soup, D,’ Reba continues. She turns towards the corner where Chilton sits, barely daring to breathe, and then turns to face Francis fully. ‘I guess I’m guilty of liking you.’ A small, self-deprecating smile twists her lips. ‘Demonstrably guilty. And I know you like me, too.’

Francis doesn’t shift on his feet the way a blushing Omega would. The Dragon holds his body steady. Perfectly poised. Ready to strike at any moment. But he does acknowledge the sentiment with the slightest bowing of his head.

Honoring her and the courage it took to say such a thing.

‘I do.’

My God, Frederick thinks, a dim part of his mind fascinated by the behavior displayed before him, even as he sits trapped in what may likely be the last few moments of his life. *They’re Courting. He’s Courting her as if he were an Alpha… But he’s doing it wrong. And she doesn’t know he’s an Omega, but she’s still taking the lead as her instinct dictates.*

‘I’ve learned that withdrawal can be a strategy to avoid pain,’ Reba says, emotion clouding her eyes for just a moment. ‘I have a deep vein of cripple’s anger in me. While I can’t get rid of it, I’ve made it work for me…’ She turns, nostrils flaring, and looks again towards Frederick Chilton and his wheelchair. Can she hear his breathing, perhaps? Maybe his racing heart? ‘It’s fueled my independence and strengthened my determination to wring all that I can from every day.’

Francis glances at Dr Chilton and takes half a step closer to Reba. It’s not an intimate move and there is nothing protective about it. He’s shaking with the effort of containing the Dragon. Keeping it from ripping her apart.

‘I’m not so scarred by life that I’m incapable of love,’ Reba adds, unaware of the danger she’s in. ‘I hope you aren’t either. Enjoy the soup.’

She turns and walks out the way she came. Francis tails her, and Frederick’s chest hollows out of all hope that salvation will come tonight.

Please, he prays. *Please, God… don’t let me die here.*

***

The light from the projector is blinding. Even sat in front of it, Frederick has to squint. He can feel his damaged eye drying out, but he doesn’t dare ask for a drop of water to moisten it.

From somewhere behind him, the Dragon finishes whatever preparations he has been doing and speaks after a long silence.

‘Do you want to know *what* I am?’

Frederick tries to lick dry lips. His tongue is like sandpaper.

‘M-more than anything. I was afraid to ask.’

The projector clicks and Frederick’s heart freezes in his chest at the watercolor artwork of William Blake’s *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed With the Sun* displayed on the screen.

‘Look,’ the Dragon growls. ‘Do you see now?’

‘Yes,’ Frederick whispers.

Another click. The next image is a photograph of Mrs. Leeds, alive and smiling. A happy, healthy Omega, caught in a moment of motherhood as she prepares sandwiches for her children.

‘Do you see?’

Frederick’s chin trembles and a tear slips down his cheek.

‘Yes.’

Another click. The next image is of Mrs. Leeds dead – her pallid skin streaked with blood, eyes replaced with shards of mirrors, a fragment holding open her mouth. She looks deformed. Transformed. Changed into something else.

'Do you see?' the Dragon croons, and Frederick shudders.

'Yes,' he whispers brokenly.

Click. Ezra Jacobi, alive. Another smiling, happy Omega stood with his Alpha.

'Do you see?'

'Yes.'

Click. Ezra dead. Mirrors and blood. Transformed.

'Do. You. *See?'*

'Yes!'

Click. It's the photo from TattleCrime.com – the one where Will has his hand on his back…

'Do. You. *See?'* the Dragon demands, and Frederick nearly chokes in terror.

'Yes! Oh God! *Please*, no!'

'"No", what?' the Dragon snarls, stalking around to stand beside him.

'Not me!' Frederick gasps.

'Are you going to tell more *lies* about me, Dr Chilton?'

'No!' Frederick can't rip his gaze away from the face of Will Graham – cold, calculating… so much like the Alpha he was once mated to. 'No, no, no, no…'

'*Why* did you tell lies, Dr Chilton?' the Dragon demands, cutting through the panicked babbling.

'No, no, it was the police!' Frederick says, blurting it all out in the hopes of saving himself. Of redemption. 'They told me to. They… they said it.'

'You quote Will Graham,' the Dragon hisses, leaning closer.

'Graham… told the lies,' Frederick pants, trying to nod as much as the glue will allow. 'Graham!'

'Will you tell the truth *now* about me?' the Dragon asks. 'About my work? My… *Becoming?'* Francis rolls his neck, feeling the Dragon flexing inside. He feels the wings unfurling beneath his skin, moving under his shoulder-blades, rippling along his spine, even as his tail coils around his leg. 'My *Art*, Dr Chilton? Is *this* Art?'

Click.

William Blake's iconic T*he Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in Sun* artwork shows on the screen, towering over them in bestial glory. A grand depiction of Primal Alpha power and Omegan vulnerability, it strikes at Frederick in a way that it never has before. He has never felt so much like the golden-haired Omega clothed in sun as he does right now.

Never felt like the Dragon might be a real possibility, standing right beside him, until now.

'Art,' he croaks, agreeing.

Francis puffs his chest out and lifts his chin. He snarls at Frederick and the Dragon uses his mangled, mutilated mouth to speak.

'*You* said that *I,* who see more than *you*, am *insane*. *I*, who have pushed the world *so* much *further* than you, am *insane*. I have *dared* more than you. *I* am the *Dragon*, and *you* call *me* insane? Before me, you are a *slug* in the sun.'

He stalks around to the front of the wheelchair and grabs hold of each arm, giving the weak, trembling Alpha a vicious shake.

'*You* are privy to a great *Becoming* and you recognize *nothing!*' An open sneer. 'It is in your nature to do *one* thing correctly; before me you rightly tremble.' He reaches up and tugs the mesh mask off the rest of the way, revealing burning amber eyes glowing with furious passion. 'But *fear* is not what you owe me.' He turns away, unknotting the belt of the silk kimono and shucking it off his body. He's hard, he can feel he is, but he doesn't care. The Dragon pulses in his veins. '*You* owe me *awe!'*

Frederick stares, amazed and horrified as the projector clicks to a blank slide. He can see the enormous tattoo, all the red and black ink on the Omega's back, even a tail curling down his leg. Slick glistens on his inner thighs and he's flushed with arousal and excitement. But his scent is so bitter – amped up and toxic – and he's so bulky… Nothing like a regular Omega.

Dear God… does he actually think that if he kills enough other Omegas he'll become a Primal Alpha himself?

Frederick's mind is swimming. He's so scared – Omegas are the most emotionally volatile and unpredictable caste anyway, and this is the Red Dragon – and there's just something so *wrong* about what he's seeing. What he's smelling.

He can't. He can't…

The Dragon stands there for a moment longer, basking in the light and then, when the projector switches itself off and the bulb dims, he leaves in silence.

Frederick sits very still and listens, breathing slowly and carefully. He can't get the stink of burning Omega scent from his nose.

Too soon, the Dragon comes back. He's wearing black boxer-briefs, the kind that cling to his Omegan curves, and carrying an old-fashioned metal lunchbox and a Thermos flask.

Frederick watches him warily, his stomach churning in nervous anticipation.

‘For your trip back home,’ the Dragon murmurs, holding up the lunchbox. His voice sounds more Omegan when it is quiet. Then, louder and more assured, he gestured to the Thermos and adds, ‘Ice… you will need that.’

He sets them both aside and raises a camera, attaching it to a tripod. Turns Chilton to face it, leaning down low as he purrs,

‘But before you go, I think we should tape for a little while.’

He switches it on, the red light an oppressive glare in the darkness of the parlor, and checks the view. On the projector screen behind Chilton, images of dead Omegas and their families continue to share space with Blake’s *Great Red Dragon*, a carousel flickering too fast to truly see, leaving only impressions of suffering.

As Chilton blinks and swallows, the Dragon stares grimly at him, eyes a dull amber.

‘Look straight down the lens,’ he says, moving around to remove the blanket he had draped across the Alpha’s shoulders. Frederick shivers, feeling more vulnerable than ever. As if the thin layer of wool had somehow been protecting him from the true horror. ‘Repeat after me.’

***

Frederick doesn’t know how long it takes. At least an hour. Probably more. His mouth is so dry it hurts and his eyes ache from staring so purposefully at the camera.

He’s exhausted. Wrung out. Hollowed out. Empty.

‘Dr Chilton,’ the Dragon rumbles, gazing down at him from behind the black camera screen. ‘You did very well.’

Frederick summons a weak, wavering smile. Hope flares; a pitiful thing inside his chest. He’s so cold.

‘You… will let me go now?’

‘I will,’ the Dragon replies. ‘Although…’ He switches the camera back on, the cursed red light flaring back to life. ‘… There *is* one way that I can help you better understand… and remember.’

He turns away and slides the mesh mask back over his face, covering his eyes and nose. Slides Grandmother’s Alphan fangs inside his mouth, refusing to balk at the bitter, metallic taste.

‘I want to understand,’ Frederick says quickly. ‘And I’ve got a very good memory.’

Francis feels the Dragon rear up. He hears the rumble as it takes over, as it coils around him, and he surrenders to it.

The Dragon turns, hissing and snarling, and clambers over the back of the couch to claim its prize. It clamps down on Dr Chilton's mouth, fangs piercing his lips, and pulls and pulls until the flesh tears and blood spills.

Frederick screams, a tortured, muffled sound of agony swallowed up by the Dragon, and then, when the Dragon pulls back to spit the mangled bits of flesh into his palm, he can't help but clench his bared teeth and scream again because the pain of having his mouth torn off is the worst thing he's ever endured.

Please… it can't get any worse than this.

***

Everybody gets twitchy when Hannibal receives mail. It always has to be x-rayed and scanned, double, triple-checked and secured before it can pass through security, but this envelope feels different.

Yellow manila, padded. Bold black letters with Hannibal's name and address. No return details. And Dr Chilton has been missing for almost twenty-four hours.

Ever since that fucking interview with Freddie Lounds.

Alana carries it to the top floor herself, in a stainless steel tray. She knows it's from the Red Dragon; she can feel it in her bones. And she wants to know exactly what he's sending to Lecter.

The smug bastard, of course, smiles when he sees her. A tiny quirk of the lips, a flicker of crimson in his eyes when he tilts his chin, and a sardonic,

'Hand delivered.'

Alana doesn't respond, just locks eyes with him and pushes the envelope into the delivery tray. With a dull thunk, the tray swallows it into the cell.

Hannibal quirks an eyebrow when the other Alpha makes no move to leave.

'May I open it privately?'

'You may not.'

Taking the envelope, Hannibal inspects the writing first before opening it. Wonders, briefly, if it is from Will, but then dismisses the thought. In all his years of incarceration, Will has never once sent him a letter, just as he agreed to never send him anything.

Until the Dragon came and Jack Crawford dragged Will back into the field.

Inside the envelope is a gauze-wrapped bundle and a slip of paper. His curiosity piqued, Hannibal unwraps the bundle, reveal a pair of pink, leech-like pieces of flesh.

Frederick Chilton's lips.

Flattery will get you everywhere, he thinks, examining them with delight. He watches, his eyes bright with mirth, as Alana peers more closely at the two moist offerings from behind the safety of the glass.

And then –

***

'With these he Offended me.'

The words are written in a personal, emotional hand. There is the Dragon's distinctive bitemark on the edge of the paper, but other than that, no other identifying signs. Still, Jack handles the note carefully in his latex gloved hands, mindful of the forensic evidence it might yet yield.

'Dr Chilton often offended me with his ignorant drivel,' Hannibal says, smirking at the other Alpha from his position bound in a straitjacket to the wheeled trolley behind the table bolted in the middle of his otherwise empty cell. 'So I certainly understand the sentiment.'

Jack's eyes flare red and his lips thin. Barely swallowing back a growl, he holds out the stainless steel evidence tray, on which lies the gauze but only one of Dr Chilton's lips.

'Where's the other one?' he demands, and Hannibal grins.

The meat was so soft. So juicy and tender. Just a hint of blood still lingering there, coating my tongue afterward.

'You know, Jack, in the days of old, high-ranking Alphas would often be presented with gifts of flesh, torn from the enemies of their pack.' He doesn't mention that the gifts were usually given by Courting Omegas. Simply nods towards the tray and says, 'This one can provide you anything the other one can.'

When neither Alana nor Jack seem amused, he chuckles.

'I'm sorry, Jack. The tragedy of what's happened to Frederick has put me in an excellent humor.'

Jack pauses. The wording of it seems… a little off. A little too specific. He remembers calling Will – telling him what happened… remembers using that word.

'Dr Chilton disappeared yesterday,' he says, careful not to reveal too much. 'Under armed escort.'

Hannibal's eyes gleam. He can practically smell the stink of charred flesh. Hear the creak of wood and the squeak of wheels, right before the splash…

'You pretended to *burn* Freddie Lounds in a wheelchair to flush me out,' he says, watching as Jack clenches his teeth to keep from swearing as he realizes what Hannibal's knowledge might mean. *Must* mean. 'What were you pretending to do with Frederick Chilton?'

‘He profiled the Dragon,’ the other Alpha admits. ‘*For* Freddie Lounds.’

‘We wanted to enrage him,’ Alana adds quietly.

Hannibal makes a point of looking down at the lip.

‘Congratulations.’ Then, looking at Alana again, in her sleek black Armani suit and her crimson lipstick, he adds, ‘*You* could have provided anything Dr Chilton could. That would have been your lip I was tasting… Again.’

A dull flush rises along Alana’s high cheekbones and the red around the edges of her eyes thickens, threatening the swallow the blue up.

‘*You* publicly *discredited* Dr Chilton,’ she hisses. ‘By refuting him, you orchestrated his end by proxy.’

Hannibal smirks and tuts.

‘*You* orchestrated end, Alana,’ he replies, cold and cutting. ‘You saw the hole and let him roll right into it. *That’s* professional discourtesy.’

It’s a clean, brutal blow… and they both know it’s true.

***

‘Tell me the truth,’ Jack says, his anger manifesting as ice. ‘Right now. No more lies. Did you tell Lecter what happened to Chilton?’

Will glances up from the photographs of the crime scene – the burning wheelchair, the fountain, the charred body… It still makes him shudder. Makes him recoil at the way the Dragon somehow managed to replicate what he pretended to do to Freddie Lounds, all those years ago.

A Courting gift… then and now. Was it my own idea? Was it his? Or was it Hannibal, pulling our strings all along?

‘How do you think I told him?’ he asks, lips twisting into a disparaging grimace. ‘I assume you already checked the call logs and found nothing. Do you imagine I re-established a mental connection from my time Bonded to him and used it to share confidential information?’

‘Damnit, Will! You have no idea the things I’m thinking right now,’ Jack replies. He huffs, eyes flickering red. ‘I just need to know you’re not…’

Still Bonded to him? Still mated to a monster?

Will ignores the prickling, stinging nape of his neck where his skin is surely reforming a crest, and scoffs quietly in the oppressive silence of the Alpha’s office.

‘You can’t even say it, but you expect me to deny it,’ he says. ‘That’s pretty poor going, Jack – even for you.’

‘Are you?’ Alana asks, slicing through Jack’s inept seething. They’re all on edge; seeing Chilton lying in the ICU, bandaged from head to toe, charred to a crisp and yet somehow still clinging to life… it’s chilled them all to the bone and ripped through the last of their defenses in a way none of them were prepared for.

Nobody has the patience for games anymore.

Will glances at her, in her sleek gray suit and blood-red vest. She perches on the edges of an armchair, hands clasped in front of her to hide how she’s shaking, but the whole office reeks of fear and Will knows it isn’t only coming from him.

He received a package this morning. A simple manila envelope, similar to Hannibal’s, addressed to him via Quantico. But inside was a very different offering. No pieces of flesh, but a tape. 16mm film, bearing tiny square holes along the edges of its length.

He could tell them the truth. Admit that his crest has been returning. That his Heat is flaring, trying to surface the more he’s around his former Alpha.

That he still feels the bond between them.

Instead, he sets his jaw and meets Alana’s eyes, his own gaze hard and unyielding.

‘No.’

Alana’s eyes flash and a sneer twists her painted lips.

‘I think you’re lying.’

Will shrugs, turning away.

‘I don’t care what you think.’ He nods towards the TV screen where Jack has prepared the film for them to watch. ‘Are we gonna see what the Dragon sent me, or not?’

Jack sighs. He leans back against his own desk as well, copying Alana’s stance, and sets the film playing.

Dr Chilton appears on the screen. He’s naked and whole, bound to an old-fashioned wooden wheelchair. His eyes are crimson with fear and sweat beads on his brow. Behind him, images of Molly, Walter and the twins play on a projector screen – silent footage of the Dragon’s thwarted hunt.

‘I have had a great privilege,’ Chilton intones, his voice shaking. ‘I have seen with wonder and awe the strength of the Great Read Dragon. I lied about Him. All that I said was lies from Will Graham. He made me say them.’

At the sound of his name, Will shivers. Goosebumps rise across his flesh and his throat catches around a whimper. He can’t stand to see his kids up there. Even Molly and Walter,

distant as he feels from them. They are his family, no matter what Hannibal says.

I just want to go home and be with them. I just want this to be over.

Alana, for all her anger a moment before, glances up at him, fear and concern etched into the tired lines of her pale face.

'I have… *blasphemed* against the Dragon,' Chilton continues, pausing every so often as if reading from a script, or reciting practiced words. 'Even so, the Dragon is merciful.'

He's not merciful, Will thinks, staring hard at the film and willing himself not to throw up at the sight of his kids in the backdrop of Chilton's whole, handsome face. *It would have been merciful to let you die.*

'He knows you made me lie. Because I was forced to lie,' Chilton stutters, 'he will be more merciful to me than to you, Will Graham…'

Frederick pauses for a moment. Will, Jack and Alana watch in horrified silence, waiting for the next sentence. Will's pulse pounds in his ears. His breath catches and he can smell his own scent, salty with fear. Can feel the way he's shaking, minutely but constantly, and he knows Alana and Jack are responding to it. And instinctive urge to protect him from the threat. He glances at Jack and Alana – they both, for a brief horrifying moment, have mirror shards in their bleeding eyes.

A blink, and they're normal again.

'R-reach behind you and feel the small knobs at the top of your pelvis,' Chilton says. 'Feel your *spine* between them… That is the precise spot where the Dragon will snap *your* spine.' His recorded voice catches on a sob at being made to say such an abhorrent thing. To snap an Omega's spine in such a place would render them infertile, immobile… but still able to feel pain. Still conscious and able to experience any amount of torture inflicted on them.

It was a punishment reserved for only the most unfaithful, untrustworthy Omegan slaves in Ancient Rome. Those deemed to be broken and then given to Alphan gladiators as a reward.

Most begged for death instead.

'There is much for you to dread,' Chilton continues, fear getting the better of him and making his voice waver, spilling tears down his cheeks as he stares with growing horror at the camera. At them. 'From my own lips, you will learn a little more to dread.'

There's a pause and then the film starts up again, showing the broad, muscular back of the Omega who calls himself the Great Red Dragon. He moves with the eerie grace of a stalking Alpha, entirely focused on his prey, and Dr Chilton whimpers as he approaches.

And then he bites. He bites Chilton's face. Tears his lips off with Alphan fangs, spraying blood everywhere. And Chilton screams, wet and racking and agonized.

'No! 'ou 'romised… 'ou 'romised!'

Will staggers backwards and falls into a chair, clasping his hands over his ears in a futile attempt to block out the sounds from the tape even as they bounce around the confines of his skull. He can't… He *can't*...

I did this. It's my fault. I did this.

'Turn it off, Jack,' Alana snaps, hurrying to his side and petting his shoulder to soothe him. 'Damn it, turn it *off!'*

The monitor clicks off, leaving them in dark silence. Will can't breathe. Heat prickles up and down his spine, radiating out from the point the Dragon threatened to snap.

He wants to disappear inside his mind. Leave this place and never come back. He can't *do* this anymore.

Alana is talking to him. Touching him still. Asking him if he's alright. If there's anything she can get him. Jack is saying something else. But their voices are muffled behind a wall of crashing water and Will can barely hear them.

My fault. I did this.

He tries to suck in another whistling breath but his lungs are too tight. Too small. Too useless for the task at hand and he shudders.

He really needs Alana to *not* be touching him. It feels like acid even through the layers of his tweed blazer and blue cotton shirt.

'I have to go,' he mutters, shrugging her off and stumbling to his feet. When she and Jack reach for him again, trying to get him to stay, arguing that he's in no fit state to leave as he is, he snarls at them and throws a hand up to keep them away. 'I have to *go!'*

'Don't go to Hannibal,' Alana warns. 'He's not permitted visitors. You won't be allowed in.'

Will throws her a scathing look – or as much of one as he can muster – and flees Jack's office as quickly as he can. He has no idea where he's going, he just knows he needs to be away from them. Away from their judgment and their scents.

You're not my Alpha.

***

He ends up at Dr Du Maurier's house. An emergency appointment, even though he's her only client these days.

The air is thick with Bedelia's disdain for him. After Will has finished relaying his panic attack in Jack's office, he grips his wrist tightly in his other hand and raises his head with a deep, wavering sigh. There's a long silence and then,

'Would you like to *talk* about what happened to Frederick Chilton?' she drawls, observing him from her seat across the rug.

Will hesitates, his knuckles still white where he's making a fist. Feeling the bite of his wedding band in a way that feels more foreign than it normally does. When he finally does speak, he can almost hear Hannibal speaking the words from his mouth, instead of him.

'Divine punishment of the sinner… *mirrors* the sin being punished.'

'Contrapasso,' Bedelia agrees. 'You play, you pay.'

Will feels a sense of calm detachment wash over him, settling his nerves from the back of his mind. He can feel his Alpha's influence settling him; an invisible hand easing him back into the chair and squeezing the tight muscles in his shoulders.

The Mind Palace opens to him and he enters the foyer – the Norman Chapel of Palermo – to find Hannibal waiting there beside a teacup and a votive candle.

Even as he opens his mouth to speak, Hannibal says the very same words inside his head.

'Chilton languished, unrecognized, until *Hannibal the Cannibal*.' Their eyes flash, gold and red, and Hannibal lights a second candle for his mate before moving away to take a seat in the pew. 'He wanted the world to know his face.'

'And now he doesn't have one,' Bedelia says dryly.

Will scowls, resenting the buried accusations of her tone.

'Damned if I'll *feel*.'

'We're all making our way through the Inferno,' Bedelia replies. 'Dante's pilgrims.'

Will scoffs, shaking his head. His skin feels too tight; too hot under his clothes. He needs more suppressants. They're not strong enough. Not good enough.

I need my Alpha, but Alana is keeping me from him.

'No, we're not pilgrims… we're *pets*. And the Great Red Dragon kills pets first.'

Bedelia takes a breath; slow and deliberate. She chooses her next words carefully.

'You put your *hand* on Dr Chilton's shoulder in the photograph. A bold move, for an Omega… but a telling one, as well.' A pause. Then, '*Touch* gives the world an emotional context. The touch of others makes us who we are.'

The scar on Will's belly tingles at her words. His crest throbs.

'It builds *trust*,' Bedelia asks, narrowing her eyes at him.

'I put my hand on his shoulder for authenticity,' Will snaps. Even to him, even now, it sounds like a hollow lie and he knows Bedelia sees right through it.

‘To… establish that he really told you those insults about the Dragon?’ she asks, prodding at something he already suspects, can already feel, but doesn’t want to acknowledge. ‘Or maybe you wanted to put Dr Chilton at risk? Just a little…?’

They cry when they do not like the stewed apricots…

Will swallows, wetting his lips with a tongue that feels bone dry.

‘I wonder,’ he whispers, his mind numb with the possibility of it. Was it really his idea to use Chilton in the photograph like that, or Hannibal’s suggestion? Or is he laying the blame at his Alpha’s door for something that isn’t his fault? Did *he* want to hurt him, to avenge his mate?

It’s all beginning to blur. I’m not sure where I end and he begins.

‘Do you *have* to wonder?’ Bedelia asks, cutting through his thoughts and snaring his attention again. Will turns, expression cold, and he knows Hannibal is with him. A second presence, watching closely.

‘No.’

I wanted him as bait. My dog on a leash. The Dragon kills pets first. And you insulted my Alpha.

Bedelia’s brows twitch into something almost resembling a frown before she schools her expression into neutrality again.

‘What did you think the Great Red Dragon would do? You were curious what would happen, that’s apparent. Is *this* what you were expecting?’

Will shrugs one shoulder, the corner of his mouth lifting in a half-smile.

‘I can’t say I’m *surprised…’*

Bedelia suppresses a shudder at how much like Hannibal he is. It’s just like sitting across from the Alpha. A golden-eyed version of him. As if his words are slithering from the Omega’s mouth.

‘Then you may as well have struck the match,’ she says smoothly. ‘*That’s* participation.’

The truth of it makes her heart beat fast, drawing the color up to her cheeks and making her eyes flash red. She swallows, turning her face away to hide the brightness of fear-induced tears.

‘Hannibal Lecter *does* have agency in the world…’ she says. After a pause, she forces herself to look back at the Omega across from her. At the man still bonded to the serial killer who held her hostage for months. Who promised to eat her just as soon as he had the chance. ‘He has *you.’*

***

Will checks in on Molly and the kids before going to the hospital. They bolster him somewhat – he gets to see a couple of drawings that Daniel has done of the dogs and the horses that Jack's family keep on the farm, and Gracie tells him about a treehouse that she and Walter are planning to build.

Molly's quiet. Too quiet for Will's liking, but he can't bring himself to ask what's going on. Their conversation is awkward and stilted in a way it never has been before.

Like they're strangers.

'I'm seeing a physiotherapist tomorrow,' Molly says, when talk of the house, the kids and the dogs has run dry. 'No more meds; just good ol' fashioned hard work.'

'Good. That's good… I hope it goes well.' Will glances out of the car window, looking at the hospital where Frederick Chilton is being treated for his burns. Where Jack is meeting him soon so they can go in together to interview Frederick during the brief time he's conscious between rounds of morphine to take his statement. 'Mol, I'm sorry; I have to –'

'I know.' Molly doesn't quite snap, but she's sharper than normal. There's a pause and then, 'You're flushed, Will. Have you been taking your suppressants? Are you due a Heat?'

'I'm fine,' Will lies, physically moving the phone away from his face in an effort to distance her from him and his biology.

You're not my Alpha.

'Will you at least talk to Jack and get him to check you out?' Molly asks, frowning. 'You haven't been right and you're under a lot of strain. I'm worried about you.'

'I've got it under control.' Will lifts up his bottle of prescription suppressants and gives it a rattle. 'I just need to get through this last push.'

Molly grimaces.

'I cannot stress enough how much I resent Jack Crawford.'

Will chuckles at that.

'Yeah, you and me both.'

'At least Duchess has settled in nicely.' Molly smiles at him, and for a moment it's just like old times. Like lying in their big bed with the knitted patchwork comforter in the log cabin up near Moosehead Lake, chatting about their latest pack member and working out what they would do with it if nobody wanted to rehome the poor thing. Budgeting for vets bills and more food.

'She's a sweet girl,' Will agrees. 'Bet she's glad to have company and space to roam.'

'She loves the water.' Molly smiles again and then sighs, a sadness lingering in her blue eyes. 'I love you, sweet man. Promise me you'll come home soon.'

Something dark and ugly twists inside Will's chest. He thinks of Chilton, lying burned and broken in a hospital bed. Thinks of the recording he watched this morning, and the Dragon's threat to snap his spine…

He thinks of Hannibal, his Alpha, his mate, still locked away inside a cage in the asylum.

You know what they say, a little voice in the back of his mind whispers. *Home is where the heart is.*

He smiles grimly and looks past Molly's shoulder to the distant image of the twins playing in the safehouse dining room. His babies… his and Hannibal's.

'I'll be home soon.'

***

Jack's waiting for him outside the ICU. They go into the ward together, but the Alpha hesitates outside the blue curtains separating them from the hydrotherapy tank where Chilton has been placed to recover.

'He did Chilton like it looked like you did Freddie Lounds. Hannibal said he would… in his own way.'

Will rolls his eyes, annoyed at his Alpha's games. At the delays they're causing him.

'Hannibal *told* him to.'

For me. He did this for me… but I don't know why. If it's an offering or a warning… or both.

Jack looks at him, expression hard.

'You okay?'

Will takes a deep, steadying breath. Swallows and forces his shaking to subside.

'Yeah. I'm okay.' He shrugs. 'I had the SWAT Team.'

Jack nods. They both understand the burden of guilt. What it can do to a man.

'Chilton said your name when they brought him into the ER.' He gives Will a moment to consider that. To take it in and process what it might mean. Then, 'He's trashed. You ought to get ready for this.'

Will nods. A small, aborted thing. He's not sure any amount of preparation can make him ready for what he's about to see. To make him ready to face the truth of what he did to Frederick.

You may as well have struck the match.

Taking another deep breath, he parts the curtains. Approaches the bath where the wounded Alpha is floating, Jack following a few paces behind. He takes care to steady his reaction when he sees the extent of the damage, even as his heart skips a beat and cold sweat makes goosebumps break out across his skin.

Chilton is barely recognizable, covered in third-degree burns, his lips torn from his mouth, teeth hanging in the wreckage of his face. His chest rises and falls with shallow breaths, and Will can see blood curl in the water as cracked skin seeps innards into the saline fluid.

The stink of burned flesh and antiseptic is almost too much to bear…

He can't look directly at him, so he focuses his eyes just above Frederick's burned, bald head. Swallows and forces himself to speak clearly, saying,

'Frederick, it's Will Graham.'

Chilton opens what's left of his eyelids to blindly search the room. Scents the air and finds the face hovering over him. Guilt and resentment swirl in Will's gut, slicing his insides like glass. He hates that he both pities and enjoys seeing Frederick as he is.

'I'm sorry this happened to you,' he adds, working his jaw and looking away. 'Did you see where he took you?'

Chilton manages to lock his hazy, eyes with Will. His jaw moves and angry words wheeze out, taking all of his strength. Still, the words are slurred, barely audible, and hard to make out.

'You set ne uh… You knew it… You set ne uh.' A pause to drag in a weak, ragged breath. Then, 'You tut your hand on ne in the tincture… like a *tet*…'

Flicker of red in his damaged irises. Weak, but there. He's angry.

'Can you understand what he's saying?' Jack asks, from his position at the foot of the tank. Will desperately wants to wet his own lips, which feel cracked and tight with how dry they are, but he can't bring himself to be so cruel.

He glances back over his shoulder towards Crawford.

'He said… "You set me up. You knew it… You put your hand on me in the picture, like a pet."' Looks back at Chilton, staring down at what could arguably be his victim. Sighs and decides not to pursue the matter. 'Did you see anything?'

Chilton takes a deep, agonizing breath, the monitors registering his distress at how much he's pushing himself.

'A *'lack* woman… she's *'lind.*'

Despite his ruined mouth, the surrogate *B* is expelled with enough breath so that it's intelligible and Will nods.

‘“A black woman, she’s blind,”’ he repeats, for Jack’s benefit.

‘“Reba,”’ Jack says. ‘The Dragon said her name when he called Lecter.’ He moves to stand by Will. It’s time for them to leave. ‘Thank you, Dr Chilton. You get some rest, now.’

Chilton stares up at Will. There’s hate there; so much hate. Resentment… blame… and fear.

Will turns away, leaving behind the ruined shell of the man who tortured him, humiliated him, and who tried to do the same to his Alpha.

‘I don’t think I’ll ever get that smell out of my nose,’ Jack mutters, scrubbing a hand over his stubble. ‘I didn’t think the human body could survive so much.’

‘The mercy would have been in the kill,’ Will says softly. ‘The Dragon chose to keep him alive. He wanted him to suffer.’

Jack looks at him from the corner of his eye, his mouth set into a grim line.

‘We’ll get the son-of-a-bitch,’ he vows. ‘One way or another. Starting with this woman. Reba.’

***

Francis attacks her on her doorstep. Stuffs a chloroform rag over her mouth, knocking her out, and when she wakes it’s to a groggy head and the distinctive rumble of his van.

She’s lying on her side in the back, her cheek on a dusty strip of carpet. When she tries to bring her hands to her face, the movement mashes her bosom. Her forearms are bound together from elbows to wrists with what feels like strips of cloth. Her legs are tied in the same way from knees to ankles and there’s something across her mouth.

What…? How…?

Her memories are fuzzy at first. The distant impression of cooking dinner when the doorbell had rung… D announcing himself and then…

Oh God…

Fear balloons inside her. Her instincts scream for her to be quiet but the fumes are in her throat; chloroform and gasoline. She retches against the gag.

Francis reaches from behind the driver’s seat to place a hand on her head, petting her dark curls and stroking her damp forehead to calm her.

‘We’re here.’

It’s D alright, but so calm. So terribly calm and strange. It barely sounds like him at all. And his touch feels weird. Hot but strong… almost like a different person.

The van stops with a crunch of tires on gravel. The engine cuts out and then everything rocks as D steps out of the cabin. Reba can't help but flinch and whimper when he slams the door shut. Whimpers again when he slides the panel door open and grabs her. She doesn't try to resist – tries to be as passive as she can be until she can fight back, until she can get safely at his eyes – but involuntary sounds escape her throat to be muffled into the gag.

D carries her in his strong arms into his house and she knows where in the house because of the ticking clock, the rug under his feet and then floorboards, and the scent of flowers.

He's taking me to his bedroom, like an Alpha carrying an Omegan mate to his lair.

A quiet sob forces itself up past her lips. Her cheeks are damp with tears.

She sinks into the mattress when he puts her on the bed. Is back on her side again.

The Dragon pets and soothes her, knowing how much she meant to his sweet Francis before they became One. He strokes her shoulder and leans down to murmur into her ear,

'If I untie you and let you sit, will you be good?' He waits for Reba's nod before untying the gag. Watches as she spits and works her aching jaw.

'I didn't know you cared this much about me,' Reba says, her mind working frantically to stay a pace or two ahead of the maniac she thought she knew. Her heart is hammering and her head still feels groggy, but she's trying her hardest to play it smart and stay alive. 'I'm glad you feel that way, but you scared me with this.'

There's no answer. D just unbinds her ankles and wrists, rougher than he normally is.

'I never hurt you,' Reba adds, trying to reason with him. She sits up, following where she can feel him, and ends up perched on the edge of the bed with him crouched in front of her. 'I never wanted to. Let's just be friends and have a good time and forget about this –'

'Shut up,' the Dragon says calmly, making Reba immediately fall silent. 'I'm going to tell you something. The most important thing that you will ever hear. Sermon-on-the-Mount important. Ten Commandments important. Got it?'

'Yes, D; I don't –'

'Shut *up*.' The Dragon lifts his chin, gazing at her as she quivers before him. 'Some remarkable events have happened in Chicago and Buffalo. Do you know what I'm talking about?'

Reba shakes her head, her pulse rabbit-fast.

'No.'

'It's been on the news a lot,' the Dragon says. 'Two groups of people were changed. Leeds and Jacobi…' He waits for Reba's small nod of realization, before continuing, 'The police think that they were murdered. You know now?'

Reba takes a breath. There's a strange whining starting in her ears. She nods.

'Do you know what they call the Being that visited those people?'

'The Tooth F-'

A strong hand across her mouth shuts off the sound.

'Think,' the Dragon growls. He grips her under her jaw, crushing the delicate bone. 'Answer *correctly*.'

Reba gasps and arches upwards, trying to alleviate some of the pressure.

'It's… D-dragon something. Dragon… Red Dragon.'

She can feel him move; feels him rise to his feet. She knows he's close – his breath is blisteringly hot against her face. And…

He smells like burnt sugar. Omegan-sweet but sick with it. She had an Omegan cousin who had a fever once; they smelled a bit like it.

Is D…? Is he…?

'I AM THE DRAGON.'

His flesh rips, giving way to red scales and leathery flesh. Great wings unfold, blotting out the light from the lamps around the bedroom, as he beholds the Beta cowering before him.

And you, he thinks, staring at Reba. *Are my Woman Clothed in Sun.*

The Wrath of the Lamb

Chapter Summary

Dolarhyde fakes his own death and attacks Will. The two Omegas make a deal to release Hannibal from custody and ensure a private meeting. Alana flees with her family. Bedelia tries to escape her fate. Will makes a choice that will have shocking consequences for everyone.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone. First of all, thank you so much to everyone who has stuck with this. I know I've had enormous gaps between these chapters and I can only apologise and thank you for your patience. Mental and physical health is much improved, and I've really enjoyed getting back into this. I hope the finale lives up to the rest of the work!!!

Just as the show left us with the opening for more delicious episodes, I wanted to leave myself the option of further works if I want to add them. For now, this is the end of the trilogy, but who knows? The ADHD-train will likely pick up this obsession full blast again in the future, so we shall see what happens then.

I'm SO grateful to all you lovely readers. I really do hope I've been able to create and share something for you to sink your teeth into. xxx

P.S. The wine bottle in the cliff-top house scene isn't actually the same one that Will gave Hannibal in Season 1, Episode 7, but I like to think it is as it's a lovely touch.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Wrath of the Lamb

‘Get up,’ D says, still with that eerie voice. ‘Stand by the bed.’

Reba obeys him – there’s nothing else she can do until she can find an opportunity to get away, listening closely for any sign of help or a way to get out of this awful, nightmare

situation. Her legs are shaking so much she's worried they won't hold her up. Her whole body feels weighted down by fear and the last remnants of chloroform.

'Do you know where you are in the room?' D asks and she nods, almost too frightened to breathe out more than a whisper of a yes. 'And you know where you are in the house?' Another nod, more of a head jerk than anything else, but enough for D to continue, 'Then you *know* where the front door is, don't you?'

It feels like a trap, but she can't lie to him. Lying to him right now would be very bad. Instead, she gives him another quick, abortive nod. She can hear him move, just slightly. A few careful paces to his right. He sounds so light on his feet. Balanced and precise in a way he never has been before.

Like a big cat stalking prey.

'Reba, feel on my chest.'

She flinches at the command; coming closer and touching him is the last thing she wants to do right now. But maybe she can use it to her advantage.

She takes a few clumsy steps closer, mindful of the uneven floorboards and the rug beneath her feet, and runs her hands up D's broad chest, heading for his face. Maybe she could try for his eyes. Hurt him enough that he lets her go. He's wearing a waxed jacket and beneath that a soft cotton t-shirt. It stretches across his muscles. She can't believe she used to find him so attractive. He's a monster.

'Bring your hands up slowly,' D instructs, and then, almost as if he's reading her mind, he's got a hand wrapped around her throat, thumbs and fingers digging into the pounding pulse. '*Don't* do what you're thinking. Just feel on my chest.'

Her breath coming in little huffs now that leave her dizzy, Reba lowers both hands back to his chest and feels around as instructed. She hates this; she just wants to go home and forget she ever met Francis Dolarhyde.

D pops open the top of his jacket and Reba's fingertips skate over a leather cord. There's something hanging around his neck.

'Just around my throat,' D murmurs, his big hand still wrapped dangerously around her own windpipe. 'You feel that? It's a key. Take it off over my head. Careful.'

Reba does as instructed, feeling the heavy metal shape in her trembling hands. She's afraid of dropping it; parts of her feel numb.

'Now,' D says, his voice so low it could be a sick parody of a lover's whisper. 'I'm going to see if I can trust you. Go to the front door. *Lock* it. Go ahead. I'll wait right here.'

Reba backs off, feeling like her legs are made of rubber. She starts to move, stumbling on the carpet and the floor. It's so much harder to navigate in her shoes, but she doesn't want to take them off. She needs to be able to run. To escape.

If I can get to the door in time, I can get out.

‘Don’t try to run,’ D calls. He growls, just once; a low, savage sound that has Reba stumbling into a side table, sloshing water in a vase of flowers. ‘I can catch you.’

Reba forces herself to breathe slowly. Waits for the water to settle and then listens carefully for the familiar sounds to guide her way. The heavy ticking of the grandfather clock. Down a step, wobbling until she finds her footing. Then carpet underneath her feet again.

Twelve steps to the front door.

She misses the lock when she first pushes the key forwards. It taps against wood, then the metal of the handle. She turns, straining to hear the faintest sound of movement. This could be it. Her once chance to escape.

She hesitates a moment longer, the key in her hand, and then puts it in the lock. Can’t bring herself to lock it; she needs to get away from this madman. This feral Omega who has killed people.

She swings the door open –

And runs straight into Francis, where he’s waiting on the threshold.

She screams; a frightened little bark of shock. Backs away as D advances on her, crowding her into the house once more.

‘Oh, Reba,’ D sighs, disappointment dripping from his voice. He shuts the door behind him, the finality of the click causing her heart to skip a beat. ‘Now *lock* the door and put the key around my neck.’

Reba locks the door as instructed, a feeling of complete despair overwhelming her. How could things have gone so badly? How could she not have known the monster he truly was? She was normally so good at sensing predators.

‘Now hang it around my neck,’ D says, and at this point he’s just taunting her. Playing a cruel game, the way a cat would play with a mouse. ‘Let’s make sure it’s locked, shall we?’

If she weren’t so terrified, his condescending tone would be enough to make her real mad, but she just bites her lip to keep from sobbing. This isn’t D – this isn’t the sweet, shy, sensitive man she fell for. This is the beast who calls himself the Dragon. A monster and a murderer.

She flinches when he gives the doorknob a hard rattle to prove she’s trapped inside with him. The Dragon hums an approving sound.

‘Very good. Now go on back to the bedroom. You know the way.’

Turning her back on him is painful, and she is acutely aware of how closely he follows her. She manages to keep from flinching again when he takes her firmly by her upper arms and manhandles her onto the soft chair.

‘Now, sit down.’ D’s voice is hushed, the mushy sound back to his speech as he says, ‘Now, sit still or I can’t keep him off you.’

‘Please try,’ Reba begs, her voice wobbling. She thinks that if she can appeal to his lingering affection for her then she might just make it out of this. It’s worth a shot.

‘Put out your hand.’ Reba *really* doesn’t want to, but she obeys anyway. Instinctively wraps her fingers around the cold metal in front of her and hears D growl low in his throat. ‘Don’t *grab* it! Feel it.’

Reba changes the touch to a sensitive one, tracing the shape with her fingertips.

‘It’s a shotgun,’ D says, and he puts it right up under her chin. Forces her to tilt her head up and bare her throat in submission. Reba can’t catch her breath and little sobs hiccup their way out of her mouth as tears roll down her cheeks.

She doesn’t want to die… Not like this.

‘Do you know what it will do?’ D asks, and she does. She really does. She tries to nod as best she can, because the Dragon needs an answer and she doesn’t want to find out how much damage the gun can do. It seems to work, because she’s still breathing. Until… ‘Take your hand down.’

Unable to see, unable to feel where the gun is pointed or the expression on D’s face, Reba feels *so* very vulnerable. For the first time in years, she hates her blindness. She never wants to be this helpless, but she is and they both know it.

‘I wish I could’ve trusted you,’ D says, his voice shaking. ‘I *wanted* to trust you. You felt so *good*.’

He’s crying – Reba thinks he’s crying. She’s crying, too. This whole situation is such a clusterfuck. But maybe she can use this. Maybe he’ll let her go…

‘So did you, D! I *love* it. Please don’t hurt me now.’

There’s a terrifying moment where she lays her fear out for him to see, her life in his hands, and then the gun drops from under her chin. Reba’s sobs redouble and she shudders.

‘It’s all over for me, now.’ D sounds a bit further back, like he’s turned away. An odd, metallic clink – like a bucket being lifted. Reba listens hard, trying to work out what he’s doing. ‘I can’t give you to Him,’ D continues. ‘You know what He will do?’

There’s the sound of liquid splashing, hitting the floorboards and carpet. And the *smell*… She knows that smell. Thick and hideous. It smells of danger.

Gasoline.

‘No, no, no…’

‘He will *bite* you,’ D continues, ignoring her whimpers. Soaks the floor around them both and then he’s back closer, his voice flat as he adds, ‘Better you go with me.’

‘No… no, no, no…’ There’s the tell-tale strike of a match and that’s bad, that’s so very bad that Reba can’t help but scream because she doesn’t want to burn to death and she can’t see, she can’t *see* to get out and this is *D* for fuck’s sake! How could he *do* this to her?! ‘Oh… oh *God*, no!’

The fire hisses as it eats up the gasoline. Whooshes as it consumes the accelerant and turns the air around into hot fury. Reba is frozen, shaking and clawing at her own jacket but unable to move. Unable to do anything but cry.

‘Oh, Reba… I- I can’t stand to watch you burn.’ D sounds almost mournful and hope sparks for just a second – hope that he will douse the flames and let her go. But then there’s a click, a deafening bang and Reba jerks as something hot and wet splatters her face.

He shot himself... He shot himself... He had a rifle and he shot himself...

It’s in her mouth. In her eyes… The coppery tang is everywhere. Reba staggers from the chair to her knees and crawls forwards, acrid smoke already scorching her lungs and making fresh tears stream down her face.

She pats at the body, feeling the leather jacket, feeling the sickening squelch of blasted flesh. He shot himself through the face. The blast took out most of his skull.

I just felt his brain…

She squashes down the urge to be sick. D is dead and she has to get out of here. He can’t stop her anymore. She fumbles for the key around his neck, putting it over her own – uncaring about the blood and gore getting in her hair. Drags a blanket off the bed and then moves to the vase of flowers, dumping them out and then pouring the water onto the blanket, soaking it. Pulls on the blanket, wrapping it around her head, staying low to avoid the worst of the smoke gathering near the ceiling.

With her face covered, she crawls forwards. Forces herself to concentrate, even as debris starts to fall behind her. Strains to hear past the crackling flames and hears the tell-tale ticking of the clock. She knows how many steps it is from the bedroom to the clock. From the clock to the door. She can do this.

Maybe it’s a blessing that she can’t see the flames. Maybe she’d be too scared. She knows the fire is raging around her. She’s disoriented, almost overwhelmed by the heat and the smoke, but determined to escape. She feels the rug under her hand and knees, then the hardness of the wooden floor.

Nearly staggering, dizzy now from smoke inhalation, Reba leans up against the door and holds out the key, frantic to find the hole and turn the latch. She sobs out a cough as it opens with a click and the handle turns, releasing her into the night. She staggers and falls through the front door, lying on the driveway, gasping the clean fresh air before a coughing fit racks her body.

Getting her feet under her, she half-trips and can barely right herself as she starts to move. No idea where she's going, only that she needs to put distance between herself and the burning house. Needs distance from *him*.

She keeps stumbling, keeps falling, but it doesn't matter. She can feel the heat fading from her back and she keeps going. It'll be okay now… it has to be okay.

It's a long time before anyone finds her.

***

Jack's sharp rap on his motel room door interrupts Will reading to the twins. He considers ignoring it, but when the Alpha barks his name a moment later, he knows he'll have to go.

'Hold on!' he calls, grimacing at his children and trying not to let his heart snap in two at the disappointment on Gracie's face. 'I'll be right back, sweetheart. Just got to answer the door.'

'Okay, daddy. But hurry – we want to know what happens to the dragon fighting the knight.'

Will smiles as he uncurls from sitting cris-crossed on the bed. He doesn't want to tell Gracie that the knight is the hero of the story – she always loves the dragon more and he always changes the ending so the dragon lives.

He'd shuddered when she asked for this particular nook. Now, whenever he reads the word "dragon" he thinks of mutilated Omegas and murdered families. Of Hannibal's placid expression as he admitted to sending the psychopath after Molly and Walter.

They're not my family, Will. And I'm not letting them die. You are.

'Reba McClane was just admitted to Holy Cross Hospital,' Jack says, skipping the preamble even as he barges into the room. Will pulls back from him, giving him space, and closes the door when the Alpha makes no move to ensure their privacy – or the suggestion of a long conversation. 'She's a Beta, African-American, and registered blind. She's being treated for mild burns and smoke inhalation. We think the Dragon tried to kill her and failed.'

'I'm reading a story to my kids,' Will says, gesturing to the iPad. He's barely finished his sentence when the view of the twins wobbles and Gracie's face appears closer, blonde brows drawn into a scowl.

'Dragons aren't evil!' she insists. 'They're just mistood.'

'She means misunderstood,' Will says quietly. Then, louder, 'I know, sweetheart. Why don't we finish our story and then I'll go and help Jack.'

'Will.' Jack arches his brows at him, but Will stands firm and he relents with a sigh. 'Fine. But be quick. I've got a chopper on standby.'

'Does Uncle Jack want to hear the story as well?' Gracie asks. 'Please? Please, please, *please…?'*

Will shrugs at Jack, whose stony face breaks into the smallest of smiles. The Alpha unbuttons his suit jacket and perches on the end of the bed, allowing Will to balance the iPad and return to his cross-legged position.

‘Since you’re here,’ Will says, ‘d’you wanna hold the book?’

Jack huffs a laugh and takes the book from him, holding it up and open so Gracie and Danny can see the pictures even as Will takes up the story again. Will feels himself blush when he does the funny voices and dragon growl, but Jack seems to get into it and even leans closer when the dragon and knight begin to fight to the death to save the princess.

‘- and then the brave dragon knocked over the knight, saving the princess from her tower and flying away to the mountains, where they would be safe.’

‘And the princess married the dragon,’ Gracie adds, grinning at Will because she knows she just stole the ending. ‘And they lived happily ever after.’

‘That sounds like a very lucky dragon,’ Jack murmurs, closing the book and setting it aside. ‘Are you about ready to go and hear a story about our own Dragon?’

‘Will you tell us the story, daddy?’ Gracie asks. ‘When you come back – will you tell us your story about the Dragon?’

Will opens his mouth to answer, though what he’ll say he has no idea, but is saved from answering because Molly appears in the background of the video call. She’s clearly overheard Grace, because her face is pinched with worry.

‘Come on, you two; time for dinner.’

‘Bye, daddy!’ Gracie turns the iPad sideways, distorting the view of her brother as they both clamber off the couch. ‘We’re having fish! I asked, because it’s your favorite.’

‘It is my favorite,’ Will agrees. He tries not to think of them dead; pale faces and blank eyes gouged out to be replaced by shards of mirror. ‘You have an extra bite, just for me.’

‘Okay. Love you, daddy.’

‘Love you more, both of you.’ He waits until Molly has taken the tablet from Gracie’s hands and offers a quick, sad smile. ‘Love you, too. All of you.’

‘Call me again later?’ Molly asks. ‘Have your flight details ready and we’ll co-ordinate so we can get back to Maine together.’

Will glances at Jack, who has returned to the door to wait impatiently for him, and then back at his Beta wife.

‘Sure.’ He can’t quite summon a smile and it comes out more like a grimace. ‘We’ll talk.’

‘Be careful, my sweet man.’

Anxiety knots his stomach and Will feels his shadow slither up behind his ribs, coiling inside his heart. When he replies, the lie tastes like ash in his mouth.

‘Always.’

***

Reba McClane is a beautiful woman. The burns and shock cannot detract from her sharp jaw, smooth skin and high cheekbones. She’s sitting up in a hospital bed, wrapped in white bandages and sucking on ice chips to soothe her throat. When she describes what Francis Dolarhyde, the Red Dragon, did to her, what he *said* to her, her voice shakes.

A female Beta police officer stands unobtrusively in the corner of the room. She writes down anything Reba says, including a physical description of Dolarhyde. She also keeps Jack out – this room is for women and Omegas only.

‘A man tried to slap me once,’ Reba says. ‘I was quiet and he couldn't find me – he couldn't see either. This one could see. He was crazy. Crazy, all right. That's it: crazy.’

‘Crazy is a fearsome word,’ Will says quietly. He can’t help but think back to the tabloid headlines about him and Hannibal. The “crazy Omega” and his “crazed Alpha”.

‘He shot himself in the face.’ Reba’s voice is growing husky where she’s overworked it. ‘I put my *hand* in it. He set f-fire to the house… He *shot* himself. I put my *hand* in it…’

Her eyes are wide. She might be blind, but even if she wasn’t all she’d know right now is the feel of Dolarhyde’s brains. His shattered skull. The smell of his blood. Too much copper. Will can see it in the way she forgets to blink. The way her nostrils flare and her lips tremble.

‘He was on… the floor.’ Reba swallows. Puts the melting chip of ice back into the bowl on her lap and shakes her head, choked with emotions.

Will rises from the chair beside the bed and gives her shoulder a squeeze.

‘I won’t put you through this again,’ he promises. ‘But I’d like to come back by. Just to say hi and see how you’re doing.’

Reba huffs.

‘How could you help it? A charmer like me.’

The bitterness and self-reproach is clear from her voice. Will won’t let her go there. He can’t. He turns to the officer, tilting his chin in just the right way to show deference.

‘Would you excuse us for a minute, officer?’

The Beta nods and leaves the room. When she’s gone, Will takes Reba’s hand.

‘In the end, he couldn’t kill you and he couldn’t watch you die. The people who study this kind of thing say he was trying to stop because you helped him. Probably saved some lives.’

‘I drew a freak,’ Reba says, her bottom lip wobbling. Will shakes his head and squeezes her palm.

‘You didn’t draw a freak. You drew a man… with a freak on his back.’

‘He smelled wrong,’ Reba says. ‘He was… I had this cousin. An Omega. He got real sick one summer. Fever of one hundred and eight. Made him smell like sugar left too long in the pan.’ She grimaces. ‘D smelled like that. I should have noticed sooner. Said something to someone.’

Will’s throat is tight. He can feel his pulse in his fingertips. Dolarhyde might be sick; there might be a physical reason for his insanity, but right now he’s bothered because Reba thinks this is her fault.

‘There is *nothing* wrong with you,’ he promises. ‘There’s plenty wrong with him.’

To his relief, Reba gives him a watery smile.

‘I know there’s nothing wrong with me.’ She shrugs. ‘In making friends, I try to be wary of people who foster dependency and *feed* on it. I’ve been with a few. The blind attract them.’

Will hums. Nods his head down and feels the scratch of his shirt against the nape of his neck.

‘Not just the blind,’ he murmurs. He can almost feel Hannibal’s phantom lips on his cheek. His Alpha is always near. Always watching. Then, ‘I’ll come back to see you in a day or so. And, er… could you do me a favor? Do something about your hair? Cos your hair… it really does look terrible.’

Reba grins a little at the joke and Will leaves quietly. She needs her rest. And he… he needs to see Hannibal.

***

The wrought-iron gates of the Norman Chapel in Palermo are scrolling, fancy things, all flowing curves and circles. They open silently, parting to admit him entrance to their shared Mind Palace, even as the automatic doors of Hannibal’s suite in the psychiatric hospital hiss open.

The chapel carries none of the sharp smells of cheap disinfectant and urine; instead, incense and the scent of old parchment lingers in the warm air, and Will can see rows upon rows of seats laid out for a sermon. He wonders if this was how Hannibal first saw the chapel; if that is why he maintains it so fastidiously.

The Alpha himself stands by the prayer candles. Dozens of red tealights set out in rows. Some have already been lit. Dressed in a cream plaid suit, Hannibal leaves his back to Will even as he licks his fingers and snuffs out one of the little flames. Will approaches, hands in his pockets, his pace leisurely. He’s in no rush and there’s no danger here. He only speaks once he’s stood beside his mate – his *former* mate, he corrects himself – and even then, he pauses to let Hannibal acknowledge his presence before saying softly,

‘Ding-dong, the Dragon’s dead.’

Hannibal considers him for a moment. Will avoids looking at him; he doesn’t want to see his reaction. Disapproval… or pride.

‘Are congratulations in order?’ the Alpha asks, his voice ringing out through the silence.

‘I didn’t kill him,’ Will replies. ‘Suicide.’

‘Then he wasn’t as strong as the Dragon, after all.’ Hannibal’s tone is light, but his contempt weighs heavy on his words. Will knows what he was hoping for; another chance for him to embrace his darkness and surrender to his urges.

‘He was trying to stop.’ Will walks a few paces off to the side, breaking the connection and returning to the hospital room. He keeps his hands in his pockets, lest the Alpha see him shaking. He’s glad she saw the twins this morning – they ground him in a way nobody else can. He keeps moving until he’s near the wall because Hannibal is leaning there on his side of the safety glass, looking for all the world like he has no cares. Like he isn’t trapped in a barren, empty cell.

‘I was rooting for you, Will.’ Hannibal sighs. ‘It’s a shame. You came all this way, and you didn’t get to kill anybody.’ He smiles. ‘The only consolation is Dr Chilton.’

Will flushes, feeling heat creep up the back of his neck as Hannibal continues, ‘Congratulations on the job you did on him. I admired it *enormously*.’ The Alpha pushes away from the wall and comes to stand in front of him, obsidian eyes glinting in the low light. ‘What a cunning boy you are.’

Will frowns, refusing to acknowledge the pleasant squirm in his belly. He will *not* feel happy because Hannibal is pleased with him. And certainly not for manipulating and causing the mutilation of another person. No matter that Bedelia accused him of the same thing.

‘Are you accusing me of something?’

‘Does the enemy inside you agree with the accusation?’ Hannibal counters. Always countering; always deflecting, until he can find a weakness and strike. ‘Even… a little bit?’

Yes.

Will clenches his fists.

‘I came back to stop the Dragon,’ he says, carefully and deliberately. ‘He’s stopped.’

‘Your family was on his itinerary,’ Hannibal says. Will can hear the strain of grief in his tone, no matter how much he keeps his voice even as he adds, ‘Safe now. You can go home again… if there’s any point.’

Another stab. A reminder of his greatest fear and the crux of the matter. Will had told Molly, he’d *told* her that he would change if he left. And he has.

He's changed back into who he was. A version of it, anyway. Bonded to a serial killer, no matter how deep the knife cut.

'Is there any point?' Hannibal adds, and Will is certain he can hear a whisper of hope in the question. His Alpha… asking him to stay.

Will hangs his head, feeling the weight of it all like an anvil on the back of his neck. He feels raw; crying inside for another chance to fix what they had but unwilling to let go of the stability he found with Molly. The gentle love she always gave him, soothing away the burns of Hannibal's corrosive affection.

'I like my life there.' He starts to move away, needing to be done with this. Needing to go, now, before he breaks and changes his mind. Before he *admits* to Hannibal that he knows the bond is unbroken. That they are still a mated pair.

If he doesn't say it, maybe it will fade again…

'It won't be the same,' Hannibal warns, following him. 'You'll see it's not the same. The unspoken knowledge will live with you, like unwanted company in the house.'

He knows. And he knows that I know. We're still mated.

Will grits his teeth.

'Molly and I *want* it to be the same.'

Hannibal hums. Unclasps his hands from behind his back and approaches the glass, every movement careful. Will tries to ignore the way his pulse kicks up a notch at the intense look on his Alpha's face; the burning devotion in his eyes and the way his scent pushes through the air vents to wrap itself in a comforting embrace around him.

'Mutual assurances you try to exchange in the dark, but in the day will pass through some refraction, making them miss their mark,' he says, making Will flinch with his own fears spoken so casually aloud. Then, 'When life becomes *maddeningly* polite, think about me. Think about *me*, Will. Don't worry about me.'

Something in Will cracks, spilling warmth through his veins and softening his insides. His Alpha knows. They both know. As much as he desperately needs the comfort of the ordinary, he also needs to know he won't be hated for abandoning his mate because he can't stay here. He can't. He can't be with Hannibal, even if he were to leave Molly. The other man is caged, and they can never be together.

Not in this life.

Will releases a single, quivering sigh, the edges of it hinting at a purr. Drops his shoulders and approaches the glass again, wishing – just for a moment – that he could walk right up to Hannibal and hold him one last time. Remembers the feel of him inside his body, all those years ago, when they fucked for the last time to celebrate escaping Mason. To celebrate being alive.

He places his hand on the glass, baring the sensitive veins of his wrist, and stares deep into Hannibal's eyes. There is a thread between them, shimmering and twisting. It's been there since the beginning, since Hobbs, and nothing will ever sever it. Hannibal tried to cut it out of him; tried to set him free, and no matter how much they fight it, no matter how far either of them run, they always find each other.

You were as good to me as you knew how to be.

'You turned yourself in… so I would *always* know where you were.' Will sighs. Shakes his head. 'But you would only do that if I rejected you.'

He swallows. Feels his heartbeat in his fingertips. This is the right thing to do… He *has* to protect the world from his monstrous mate. Has to ensure Hannibal will never find a way to break out of here and come looking for him.

Has to reject him, again, for the good of this world. For his children. He feels his eyes flicker gold, his throat aching with a suppressed whine. 'Goodbye.'

He pushes away before he can hesitate, turning his back on the other man and hurrying to the door. It hurts; like razors down his spine, and he pulls up short the moment Hannibal speaks.

'Will…' Hannibal watches as the Omega stills, looking back with a pained expression. 'Was it good to see me?'

Will jolts, the back of his neck twinging.

'Good?' he manages, his voice strangled. He thinks of dead Omegas. Dead children. His own aborted Heat and the nightmares brought with it. The terror he'd felt when Hannibal had so stupidly sent the Dragon after the twins.

Thinks of the desperate need to be with his Alpha again. To be known so *completely* by another person. To be accepted, exactly as he is.

Good is not a word he would ever use to describe how feels when he's with his Alpha; it doesn't even come close. 'No.'

Before Hannibal can say anything else, he forces his feet to carry him out of the room and away. If he doesn't put as much distance between them as possible now, he never will.

In his mind, their shared connection quivers like a taut bowstring. Will leaves the Alpha standing on the steps of the altar, a trickle of plaster dust raining down on him where the crack in the ceiling widens.

It will all fade, soon enough. He can return to blissful darkness and strange dreams full of endless tunnels. Fitful sleep, but the promise of Molly's warm embrace when he jolts awake.

They can make it work. They want it to work.

For now, he focuses on walking. One step, then another, then another. All the way out of the building, ignoring the way his lungs get tighter and his skin prickles as the distance between

them grows.

‘How did it go?’ Jack asks, starting the engine as Will wrenches open the passenger door of the SUV and climbs inside. ‘Did he say anything?’

‘Just drive,’ Will mutters, staring out at the overcast sky, trying not to shake. Jack, in a rare show of compassion, shuts his mouth and does as he’s told, taking him away from the hospital. Silence sits between them as the car eats up the road, and Will watches as the sun begins to fade beyond the horizon.

‘You going back to the motel?’ Jack asks. ‘Or is there someplace else you want me to drop you?’

‘There’s a diner round the corner,’ Will says, pinching the bridge of his nose as his head throbs with a tension headache. ‘Just drop me there. I’ll walk back.’

Jack does as requested, pulling up to the curb so Will can half-fall out onto the sidewalk.

‘Will,’ the Alpha barks, just sharp enough to make Will pause and look back at him. ‘Eat something. You look like shit.’

Will grimaces and turns away, ignoring his own reflection in the glass of the diner windows. Eating won’t help; he’s not even sure he could stomach food right now. Maybe a coffee. He’s just glad he has whiskey in his room.

Stepping into the diner, he cringes at the way the overhead bell clangs and announces his presence. He avoids the eyes of the two burly Alphas – truck drivers, most likely – who look over at him from the high red vinyl stools by the counter, and tucks himself into a booth in the far corner. A waitress comes over, all motherly smiles, greying curls and neat blue uniform.

‘What can I get for you, hon?’ she asks, looking down at him with kind blue eyes. Will shivers, feeling flushed and clammy inside his plaid shirt and jacket.

‘Um… just coffee, thanks.’

‘Sure thing; you want cream and sugar with that?’ The waitress is a Beta; Will can tell by the subtle absence of scent and the way she pauses when she sees the gold in his eyes. ‘We make a mean hot chocolate if you fancy something a bit sweeter.’

‘Just coffee.’

‘Sure.’ The waitress pauses, glancing around. ‘You ordering for your Alpha, too?’

‘No.’ Will clenches his back teeth hard enough to hurt. ‘It’s just me.’

The statement is innocuous enough – it’s unusual for an Omega to be out alone after dark without friends or their Alpha, but not unheard of – but it stabs at Will and twists like a knife in his heart. It *is* just him. He can never be with his Alpha. Can never find comfort in his touch again.

Telling himself it's a good thing is even harder now than it was when he left the hospital barely two hours ago.

He barely tastes the coffee when he drinks it. He should use this opportunity to call Molly; to check on the kids and make plans for meeting up at the airport. Co-ordinate flights so they all get back to Moosehead Lake together. A family again.

But he doesn't. Instead of planning a return to his life of normalcy, Will scrolls on his phone, bringing up a dozen tabloid photos of his time in the secure hospital – his muzzled face and burning, resentful gold eyes, his body strapped down and wheeled without his consent – and comparing them to Hannibal's incarceration. The Alpha has barely been seen since his court appearance; he was permitted to wear a suit on that occasion, creating a striking image of a mildly amused Alpha entirely too-in-control of the situation, even as a judge declared him mentally unfit to stand trial.

Cannibal. Monster. Predator.

It's a good thing he left him behind. Will pockets the phone and stands up, throwing a crumpled bill down onto the sticky tabletop – his thanks to the waitress for leaving him in peace, even after he refused to order anything beyond free coffee.

It's a good thing.

He brushes a frustrated hand over wet eyes as he fumbles for the key to his motel room. Leans heavily on the jamb as he struggles to make it fit in the lock.

It's a good thing he's walking away from Hannibal. He wants to forget about him. Wants his old life back.

He's barely had time to flick on the lights before something thuds into his back, forcing the door closed and pinning him up against it. Will braces, his senses assaulted by the sudden weight crushing him and the burnt sugar scent of distressed Omega.

Reach behind you and feel the small knobs at the top of your pelvis… That is the precise spot where the Dragon will snap your spine.

Will bucks and thrashes, desperate to shake Dolarhyde off. He knows who this is; he *knows*, and he cannot let the other Omega win.

Dolarhyde grunts, holding on tight, and Will panics when he feels a cool, wet wad of cloth close over his mouth and nose. He tries to hold his breath, tries not to inhale the noxious fumes of chloroform, but he's struggling and his lungs are already burning.

He kicks off against the door, throwing Dolarhyde backwards, but the other Omega is bigger and stronger – muscles carved from countless hours lifting weights – and Dolarhyde hangs on tight, dragging Will with him. They both crash down as a chair skids away, limbs tangled and scents mingling, and in the confusion of the fall Will feels himself take a breath.

His head swims almost instantly. Fogginess blurs the edges, and his thoughts skitter around his skull like rats trapped in a burning pot. Dolarhyde squeezes, wrapping his arms around him like a boa constrictor, and Will snuffles in another frantic breath. More of the chloroform assaults him, dragging him under, and his eyes drift shut even as he kicks weakly with his legs.

It's dark on the other side, and madness is waiting… Let go, Will. Just let go.

Will fights, and fights and fights, but he cannot win against the inevitable. He takes another breath, muffled and dosed with chemicals, and then there's nothing.

***

He wakes to a pounding head and a bitter taste in his mouth. Blinks water from his eyes and realizes Dolarhyde has thrown a glass of it over his face to bring him round.

The room is still blurry at first; dimly light and still choked with shadows. Will has no idea how much time has passed. What happened to his body when he was unconscious. Right now, he doesn't think he can move. Thinks he'll vomit if he does. The nape of his neck is aching fiercely; Dolarhyde must have grabbed it when they wrestled. That, or he's suffering from a badly broken spine. The kind that prevents him from walking but does nothing to prevent pain.

Dolarhyde moves to the end of the bed, commanding his attention. He sets the small motel room glass down on the floor and perches on the mattress, a silenced gun still clutched in his hands. His expression is intense but oddly calm; he understandably feels in complete control of the situation.

'Do you think you can sit up?' he asks softly. 'Try to sit up.'

Will lifts his head, surprised to find he can do so. He shifts upright, tensing his fingers and toes. Everything works, sluggish though his body feels.

'You didn't break my back.'

Dolarhyde leans forwards, peering at him the way a scientist might inspect a new specimen. Will can see the rusty gold swimming in the other Omega's irises; the muddied shade of someone suffering a physical imbalance. He wonders how bright his own are; not the light gold of an unbonded virgin, but a healthier shade than the Dragon's.

At least, he hopes they are. He doesn't feel all that healthy, right now.

'Your face,' Dolarhyde muses, '… is closed to me.'

Will feels his shadow stirring, rumbling up from his depths, called forward by the accusation.

'If I can see you,' Will says, 'you can see me.'

Dolarhyde seems almost amused.

‘Oh, you think you understand, don’t you?’ he says, his voice soft and sibilant. Will wants to scoff; would do so if he had enough strength. Instead, he gathers as much of his wits about him as he can and draws on all the bullshit that Hannibal has ever fed him.

‘I understand that “blood and breath are only elements undergoing change to fuel your Radiance.”’

He can hear the whisper of his Alpha in his mind as he recites the sentence. Remembers how he’d quivered in expectation. Remembers feeling special. Like he’d been the only one.

Remembers the embarrassed anger and humiliation when Hannibal had said the same fucking thing to a psychopathic killer.

He sees Dolarhyde pause. Draw up in surprise, hurt lingering around his scarred mouth. His amber eyes.

‘Hannibal said those words,’ Will says, ‘to me.’

Dolarhyde growls; just once. Low and deep.

‘I wanted to share with Lecter,’ he rumbles, ‘and Lecter *betrayed* me.’

‘He betrayed me, too,’ Will says. ‘And I was bonded to him.’

Am bonded to him… will always be with him.

Dolarhyde’s eyes flash, still absorbed with Will’s face.

‘I… I would like to share,’ he says. Then, ‘I… would like a mate.’

Fear is a cold knot in Will’s stomach. If he hadn’t felt sick before, he does now. There’s a hunger in the other Omega’s face that has no place there. Samuel Coby wore that same look, right before he shoved Will down onto the concrete and tried to force himself on him.

Dolarhyde wants so badly to be an Alpha… taking an Omegan mate would cement that belief. But Will is *Hannibal’s*. Has been for years. Always will be.

The truth is startling in its clarity. For all that he had fretted earlier, for all the lies he tells himself about his life with Molly… it slips away in the face of danger. When confronted with the threat of someone challenging Hannibal’s claim on him, Will cannot deny how much he wants the other man.

How he would do anything to preserve what they have, twisted and monstrous as it may be.

‘You shared with Reba,’ he says carefully, feeling his way through Dolarhyde’s madness, wary of making a mistake. ‘You wanted to mate with her.’

‘I shared with Reba… a little,’ Dolarhyde agrees. ‘In a way that she could survive. She had one flash of my glory.’

‘But you didn’t change her.’

‘I chose not to change her,’ Dolarhyde says. A mad light appears in his eyes. ‘I’m *stronger* than the Dragon, now. I *am* an Alpha. And an Alpha needs a mate.’

‘Dr Chilton was just an annoyance to you,’ Will says, a plan forming in his mind, even as he speaks the silken words. ‘And I’m no threat. *Hannibal Lecter* is who you need to change. He’s the final piece.’ He swallows bile, the next words feeling like glass in his mouth. ‘Kill him… and you can claim me as your own.’

Dolarhyde rumbles his approval of the idea. He makes an aborted move to reach out, stopping himself before touching Will’s sprawled legs. Will uses every ounce of self-control to keep himself from flinching, even going so far as to tip his head further to the side to bare his throat to Dolarhyde. The Omega who has convinced himself he’s an Alpha. Who wants to pin him, bite him, and mount him.

‘I wanna meet Lecter,’ Dolarhyde rasps. ‘How would I manage that, my sweet mate?’

Will drops his head again, feeling his eyes prickle as they turn completely gold.

‘I have an idea.’

***

The savaged remains of what is presumably Francis Dolarhyde lie under the harsh white lights of the FBI forensic science unit. Jimmy Price and Brian Zeller are positively humming with excited energy, and Jack pinches at the cluster of tension between his eyebrows. It’s too early in the morning for this, but they’d called saying they had an important find so he’d dragged himself out of bed and now, here he is, mouth bitter with stale coffee and head pounding.

‘The only teeth we found in the skull were Grandma’s dentures,’ Zeller says, holding up a petri dish with the charred teeth.

‘And the upper part was made of vulcanite, instead of acrylic, like they use today,’ Price adds. ‘No one’s made vulcanite plates in fifty years.’

Zeller waves him away, eager to share his own findings.

‘Dolarhyde had a new acrylic set just like them made to fit him,’ he says. ‘Chinese manufacturer. The new pair we found on the body. Grandma’s old yucky pair, we found in his mouth.’

‘Well, not *his* mouth, per se,’ Price says, and Zeller nods, about to speak when the other Beta continues, ‘We think it’s a guy called Arnold Lang. He’s missing; worked at the service station near Dolarhyde’s. Found his car, but it’s been wiped clean.’

‘So, Dolarhyde snuffs out Lang,’ Zeller says, jumping in when the other man pauses to take a breath, ‘takes the dead body back to the house, does the whole song and dance with the blind lady. The “will I shoot you?” “Won’t I shoot you?”’

‘“I can’t stand to see you burn!”’ Price interjects, screwing up his face with mock tears. ‘“Boo-hoo!” And then *blows* Lang’s head away with a twelve-gauge.’ He even does the arm movement of shooting a shotgun for effect.

It’s crazy… but entirely possible. And likely, given the Dragon’s propensity for theatrics. Jack feels a shiver run down his spine. He hides his shaking hands in the pockets of his suit pants.

‘So, the routine of hanging the key around his neck was to be sure she felt the body,’ he says. ‘So, she could tell us she certainly *felt* a body.’

He turns, his gaze falling upon Will, who he’d dragged out of bed at the same ungodly hour. The Omega is quiet, his skin pale, more of a contrast because of his dark shirt and jacket. He doesn’t express much, his gaze distant as he stands with his hands in his pockets, looking at the corpse.

‘The Great Red Dragon lives,’ Will says softly, finally quirking an eyebrow. Jack jerks his head, motioning him to follow, and they step outside into the corridor. Will speaks again, absently taking in the view of Zeller and Price working on the body in the lab beyond the glass walls. ‘The obvious thing is to try to get him to come to us. Bait him with something he wants more than me.’

‘He’d have to be an *idiot* to go for it,’ Jack says, mouth pinched, brow furrowed. Will quirks a cold smile.

‘I know. Want to hear what the best bait would be?’

‘I’m not sure I do…’ Jack replies, already sounding resigned. Will tips his head, his eyes flickering gold and a hint of submission in the curve of his neck, just to seal the deal. It’s Omegan manipulation at its finest.

‘*Hannibal* would be the best bait.’

Jack scoffs and rolls his eyes, making the shadow inside Will’s ribcage writhe indignantly at the slight against his mate.

‘Why in *God’s* name would anyone want to meet Hannibal Lecter?’ the Alpha grumbles. Will turns, fixing his eyes on the taller man’s chest. The silver pin affixing his ID badge to his winks in the low light. It reminds him of the strange glint he sometimes sees in Hannibal’s eyes.

‘To kill him, Jack.’ He says it plainly and simply. ‘The Dragon could absorb him that way. Engulf him. Become more than he is.’

Jack nods slowly, clearly thinking it over.

‘You sound pretty sure.’

There’s a hint of something to his tone; maybe concern. Maybe suspicion. Will needs to smother than before he discovers the truth.

‘I’m not sure,’ he grouses, making a show of adjusting his weight and shaking his head. ‘Who’s sure? I’m not even sure Hannibal would draw the Dragon; I just say that it’s our *best* shot.’

Jack buys himself a moment by glancing back through the windowed walls into the forensic science lab. Zeller and Price are still bickering over something on the shotgun, the charred remains of Arnold Lang sitting on the metal table between them. When he turns back to Will, he lowers his voice.

‘Set him up *how?’*

And this is the part that Will has been practicing. Memorizing. Imagining every step, every moment of action since the Dragon came to him last night. He has to be perfect; has to get this right so it all goes to plan.

‘We take Hannibal into federal custody,’ he says, lifting his golden eyes to Jack. ‘And we fake an escape.’

He sees the moment Jack latches on; when he agrees in his mind, even before he says the words aloud. The plan is reckless, dangerous, and altogether flawed… but Jack is nothing if not ambitious. Alphas can so easily be ruined by their own relentlessness.

Within the hour, the plan is signed, sealed and ready to enact. Will steps out of the building at Quantico feeling lighter than before, his veins fizzing with anticipation and his gut churning. He’d offered to tell Hannibal the plan, to which Jack had agreed all-too-easily, and now there’s just one other person he needs to see before he returns to the hospital.

***

Bedelia takes the news as well as can be expected. Her face drains of color and her eyes flash red, the pupils constricting to pinpricks as the salty tang of fear clouds her scent. She looks sick with it, but Will has no pity for her. He just watches, darkly satisfied, as she goes to her liquor cabinet and pours herself a general measure of whiskey. She doesn’t offer him one and takes a moment before speaking quietly.

‘We assign a moment to decision,’ she says softly, holding the glass in a shaking hand. Will rolls his head and looks over at her, satisfied at just how terrifying the prospect of Hannibal’s freedom is to her. She had a hand in his incarceration, freeing herself from justice in the process. All debts become due, after all. ‘What you propose,’ Bedelia continues, her voice catching on a growl, ‘is so *thoughtless*… I find it difficult to imagine that moment exists.’

Will’s heart skips. She thinks him thoughtless, when in fact he spent the better part of the night mulling it over. Back and forth, weighing up the pros and cons, and none of it helping because it wasn’t a thought, it was a need. He *needed* Hannibal to be free. Needed to send the Dragon after him, for them to right, because then he would know. One way or the other, he would be sure.

Either they would both die, or he would be with Hannibal for the rest of his life.

‘Decisions are made of kneaded feelings,’ he replies, his own scent sweet in the air around him. There’s a sense of anticipation to it. He can admit to himself that he’s excited. ‘They’re more often a lump than a sum.’

Bedelia does growl, then, just once, and begins to move closer.

‘However you think you are going to manipulate this situation to your advantage…’ She sits in the armchair across from him once more and crosses her long legs at the knee, a gesture of barely-there control. Will wonders if she’s done it to keep from fleeing. ‘*Think* again.’

‘There’s no advantage,’ Will says. He’s resigned to this. It has to be done. ‘It’s all degrees of disadvantage.’

Bedelia scowls at him, her scent still acrid and bitter.

‘“Who holds the Devil, let him hold him well,”’ she snaps. ‘“He will hardly be caught a second time.”’

Will’s eyes flare gold and he bares his teeth at her. When he replies, his voice is shaking and barely above a whisper.

‘I don’t *intend* Hannibal to be caught a *second* time.’

He couldn’t stand it. Can’t stand it now. Having Hannibal so close and yet separated by a sheet of Plexiglass… It’s torture for them both. Either his mate needs to die, or…

The alternative is almost as horrifying as the idea of the life draining from his Alpha. Hannibal can’t die… not by any hand but Will’s own. Maybe he should take them both out together… One final push to save himself. To save them all.

Bedelia’ expression softens a fraction. She understands.

‘Can’t live with him,’ she says softly. ‘Can’t live without him.’ She huffs what might be a bitter laugh. ‘Is that what this is?’

‘I guess…’ Will shrugs one shoulder. ‘This is… *my* Becoming.’

Bedelia bares her teeth and stands up, pacing away from him.

‘What you are “becoming” is pathological.’

‘Extreme acts of cruelty require a high degree of empathy,’ Will reminds her. Bedelia rolls her eyes at him.

‘You’ve just found religion. Nothing more dangerous than that.’ She takes another sip of whiskey; a futile attempt to calm her nerves.

Will stands and buttons his blazer again. He’s conscious of how he’s dressing; the sharp, sleek lines that his Alpha favors, his hair neatly styled, and beard clipped. It’s how he looked when he and Hannibal were courting after his incarceration, when he was luring the Alpha to

that fateful night in the townhouse kitchen. Unconsciously mirroring his mate's patterns and styles, donning the fashion like armor.

'I'd pack my bags if I were you, Bedelia,' he says breezily. 'Meat's back on the menu.'

Bedelia turns, vengeful, spiteful, and for a moment Will thinks she'll throw the glass at him.

'You righteous, reckless, twitchy little *bitch*,' she snarls. 'He might as well cut all of our throats and be done with it.'

Will ignores the insult, knowing this is the Alpha's true nature; with all her protection stripped away to reveal the pale, slithering coward inside.

'Ready or not,' he purrs, 'here he comes.'

He walks from the room, glass shattering against the door as he closes it behind him, and smirks Bedelia's cry chases him from the house.

***

Alana has hated hospitals ever since Abigail threw her from the townhouse window. She hates the vulnerability of being a patient. Of knowing things are happening to your body outside of your control. Bones mending, hormones shifting… latent genes activating to keep her alive.

Dr Chilton is a ruined shell. It almost seems cruel to keep him alive. His withered, charred form lies in a large hyperbaric chamber, his body a mixture of hard, burned flesh and red wet-looking patches of skin graft. He looks like some fetal abomination that should never have been born to the world.

Alana approaches carefully, her footsteps measured on the tiled floor, giving Frederick a chance to wake from whatever slumber he had found and become aware of her presence. The other Alpha rolls his bald head on the soft cotton pillow inside the tube, his breath rasping between bared teeth.

'Dr 'loon,' he wheezes, struggling to make the right sounds without lips. 'You *hinally* 'roke down and cane to *hisit*.' He looks up at her with clouded, milky eyes. Gone are the red irises of his Alphan caste; he is too damaged for that, now. 'Your *hace* did not change at all when you *hirst* looked at ne. Shock in seeing ne is… usually delayed.'

'I wanted to see you, Frederick,' Alana says softly, catching a glimpse of her pale face, dark hair pinned back in a low bun and crimson lips in the clean glass of the chamber. 'I wanted to remind myself what Hannibal is capable of.'

'What *Hannigal* is ca'able of…' Chilton locks eyes with her. 'What *Will Grahan* is ca'able of. What *you* are ca'able of.' He pauses for a moment, his breathing fast and shallow. Speaking is obviously painful, but what he needs to say is more important. 'You,' he manages, 'were the ro'er.' It's a mangled sound, like a click in the back of his throat instead of the letters his lipless mouth can no longer make, and it takes her a second to understand it

– "roper" – but she does. 'Too *gad*,' Chilton adds, 'that there was not enough ro' for you to hang yourself with. Just enough… to hang ne.'

Another brief pause. Alana keeps her gaze trained on him, unflinching. His pain is a distant thing to her. A reminder of what she is now capable of. What she has been capable of since she changed. 'Who does Will Grahan have you ro'ing now?' Chilton asks, a trickle of saliva escaping from his mangled mouth. Alana feels something like pity stir in her, but fear is a far more dominant emotion.

'Hannibal.'

Chilton's laugh is a breathless cough.

'If I had then,' he says, 'I would burn the man alive. Though…' He considers. 'Maybe I would rather have his skin.' He sighs. 'I've *geen* getting grahts.' Alana looks at his patchwork skin and the miscolored skin grafts creating a tapestry of suffering. 'How I would love to count *Hannigal* as one of my donors.'

Alana looks at him with open pity in her blue eyes.

'You were never comfortable in your own skin, Frederick,' she says softly. 'You wouldn't be comfortable in Hannibal's.'

'Are you?' the other Alpha asks, knowing and far too smug in that knowledge. Alana sighs.

'Goodbye, Dr Chilton. I doubt very much we'll see each other again.'

She turns and walks away, leaving Frederick to wheeze and hurt alone. She has one more errand to run before she takes her family and runs.

***

Steeling herself before the automatic doors leading to the outer chamber of Hannibal's room, Alana thinks back to the heated argument she'd had with Jack Crawford this morning. Her fury had been an icy, silent thing as she listened to his proposal – to fake an escape – and she did nothing to temper her words when she told him how stupid it was. How reckless.

'And whose idea was this?' she'd demanded, pacing up and down behind her desk as Jack watched her from his seat on the other side.

'Will suggested it,' Jack had admitted, but before Alana could do more than open her mouth, he'd added, 'and *I* agree with him. If I didn't think it was a shot, our *only* shot, I wouldn't even be considering it.' He had leveled her with a look that might have cowed her before, but now only served to fuel her rage. 'The Dragon is still out there, Alana. We failed to bring him in. I failed. This is how it has to be. It's the only way.'

As the doors part and Alana steps into the dim interior of the top-level room, she tries not to imagine Frederick's burned face. His lipless sneer when he'd heard she was doing Will Graham's bidding again, this time trying to snare Hannibal.

It was a fool's mission, and she wanted no part in it. The Omega was so desperate for his Alpha that he'd do anything… and Jack was arrogant enough to hear what he wanted.

It would be better to leave the Dragon loose in the world than risk freeing Hannibal Lecter.

The incarcerated Alpha is standing with his back to the Plexiglass, his feet planted firmly apart, and hands clasped behind his back. He looks calm, relaxed, as if he's admiring one of his beloved paintings in the Uffizi gallery, rather than a boarded over marble mantlepiece.

'There's a deal for you, Hannibal,' Alana announces, approaching the glass. 'Or there could be.'

'A deal?' Hannibal's voice betrays nothing. No hint of curiosity or concern. Not yet. He's waiting for her to fumble. 'With whom?'

'The FBI.'

Hannibal takes a moment to turn, keeping his face averted.

'Jack couldn't ask me himself?'

'Jack doesn't know you as well as I do,' Alana replies, her voice sharpening. 'He thought if he asked you for help, you would just torment him.'

At that, Hannibal finally completes the slow turn and smiles, his eyes hooded.

'Quite right, too,' he says. 'How wise of Jack.'

Alana feels her pulse quicken. She works hard to keep too much fear from making her voice quiver, but a little can be used to manipulate the other Alpha. He is drawn to fear like blood in the water draws sharks.

'The Red Dragon faked his death,' she admits, and watches as Hannibal gives a single, small nod of respect, his gaze distant again and turned at an angle. It reminds her of the big cats in the zoo, watching from the shadows for someone to fall into their pits and be toyed with.

'Good for him.'

'Jack wants to fake your escape,' Alana continues. 'I release you into police custody, and Jack uses you as bait.'

It's a subtle change in his expression, but Hannibal looks pleased, almost proud, at hearing the plan.

'Was it Will's idea?' he asks, and Alana feels a cold shiver run down her spine as she thinks of just how lost the Omega is.

'Yes.'

‘Yes; that worked out *so* well for Frederick Chilton.’ Hannibal turns to her again, smiling brightly. ‘Do please tell Frederick, if you see him, I wish a speedy convalescence and hope he won’t be very ugly.’

Alana scowls at the casual cruelty. She knows it shouldn’t get to her, but it does. The petulance of it… the disrespect.

‘I’ve been on the phone for hours on your behalf, and *this* is what you get –’

‘Any rational society would either kill me or give me my books,’ Hannibal interjects, approaching the glass wall as he does. Alana plants her feet and holds her ground, ignoring the salty tang in her musky scent. She considers for a moment, glancing down, and then says,

‘If you co-operate in the capture of Francis Dolarhyde, you get your books, your drawings, your toilet. All privileges will be restored.’

Hannibal watches her, his dark eyes only thinly ringed with red.

‘You trust Will with my wellbeing?’

‘As much as I trust you with his,’ Alana replies, because that’s really the crux of it. She has no idea if they will save each other or kill each other. She doubts even they know until it happens. It’s a dangerous game… but she has no choice.

‘You trust me with yours?’ Hannibal asks, black holes boring into her. ‘You intend to release me into police custody. Police are not as wise as you are.’ He lowers his voice, as if sharing a secret, a smile tugging at his lips. ‘I might escape in earnest and come to kill you.’

‘First chance you get, I assume,’ Alana drawls, feigning boredom while her mind races over the carefully laid plans of her escape.

‘You died in my kitchen, Alana,’ Hannibal says, an air of sincerity that makes his next words so much worse. ‘When you chose to be brave. *Every* moment since is borrowed. Your mate… your child… They belong to me. You made a bargain with Will’s life, and then I spun you gold. Never forget that.’

Alana swallows back a growl. She holds Hannibal’s gaze for another moment, holding her breath against the way their scents clash in the air around them, and then leaves to give him think to think. As much as she tries not to, however, it feels like running away.

***

Jack pours them all a whiskey when Alana arrives at Quantico later that evening. She doesn’t make them wait, just stands by Jack’s desk with her arms crossed in the darkened office.

‘Hannibal has *tentatively* agreed to the deal, as proposed.’

‘What will it take to make him *less* tentative?’ Jack asks, unsurprised when Alana directs the next words to the Omega standing in the shadows by the door.

‘He wants Will to ask him,’ Alana says. She rolls her eyes. ‘And he wants you to say “please”.’

Will feels a tug behind his navel. He’s grateful for the mouthful of heat suppressants he swallowed before leaving his motel room that afternoon. His skin feels tacky under his clothes, but the symptoms seem to be under control for now and his mind is clear. He just has this low itch at the nape of his neck, like unseen fingers ghosting back and forth over the hot, sensitive skin.

‘I’ll say “pretty please”,’ he replies, managing to keep his voice flat and devoid of emotion. At this point, he’ll do anything to get Hannibal to agree to the deal. He still doesn’t know what he’ll do when he has him… Sacrifice him to the Dragon… Flee with him… Or maybe kill them both. It’s a blur… a tangled mess of hormones, desperation and anger, every strand dipped in fear.

Jack hands him a tumbler and Will inhales the fumes. Alana accepts hers and they both crowd near the desk as Jack perches on his side. This is their final chance to plan. To calculate. Once they start, it’ll be down to this strategy and dumb luck.

‘Well,’ the grizzled Alpha says, ‘people are going to stampede if they think that Lecter is out.’

Will sips his drink.

‘Let them stampede,’ he says. ‘Authenticity.’ He pauses, his brow pinching into a small frown. ‘And… let them believe *I* helped Hannibal escape. His lovesick Omega… desperate to be with him.’

Alana swings her head to look at Jack. She does nothing to hide the worry she feels. Jack frowns.

‘Authenticity?’

‘Someone has to be close,’ Will reasons, ‘when the Dragon comes.’

‘And then?’ Alana asks, looking at him carefully. She knows… she’s overheard their conversations. Watched the way they’ve been with each other… She knows about the twins, about their bond. Everything. She’s smart enough to be suspicious. More suspicious than Jack, anyway.

‘*We* kill Dolarhyde,’ Jack says, his voice so low it’s almost a growl, tinged with a hint of Rut at the prospect of violence. ‘And then,’ he adds, glancing from Alana to Will, ‘we kill Hannibal.’

Alana looks at him, but Will merely raises his glass in salute and mutters,

‘To the Devil his due.’

***

That evening, he calls Molly for what feels like the last time. She sobs when he tells her the Dragon is still alive. When he shatters the illusion of safety that had meant she and the kids could go home. She sobs harder when he tells her his plan. Hunched over the scrubbed wooden table in Jack's farmhouse, she leans close the iPad screen and stares down the camera at him, her blue eyes wild and rimmed with red.

'*Promise* me you'll come back from this. *Promise* me I won't lose you.'

Words crowd Will's throat, fighting to break free. He wants to promise that and more; wants to say he's faithful to her, dedicated and loyal. That she and the kids are all he needs. He wants to plan their future together and be there to see it happen. Wants it all… But he can't ignore the pull behind his navel or the crawling heat on the back of his neck. The way his shirt catches on the sore skin and makes it impossible to forget that there's *something* there. A partial crest, maybe… His body rebuilding the ridges… A scent-soaked part of him waiting for his Alpha's bite to reseal the bond.

'I'll be alright,' he manages; the only honest thing he can say. 'I won't let the Dragon kill me.'

'It's not just the Dragon I'm worried about,' Molly says. 'It's *him*. *He's* the one who scares me, Will. And his hold over you.'

'I'm not doing this for Hannibal.' The words sound hollow. They sound like lies, and he knows Molly thinks it as well.

'He tried to kill you, Will,' she says. 'I don't even know how many times he hurt you, both your body and your mind. He sent a *psychopath* after your *children*.'

'And I will never forgive him for that,' Will replies. 'But this is the best chance we've got of stopping the Dragon.'

'Is it?' Molly shakes her head. 'I'm not sure, this time. I can't help but wonder if you *want* it to be the best chance… because it's the best chance for *him*.'

'It's already arranged.' Will checks his watch. 'I'm heading over to the hospital soon. I just needed to talk to you… I needed to tell you, before I left.'

'Don't say goodbye,' Molly says, her voice wobbling. She shakes her head, fresh tears threatening to spill. 'Just call me when you're heading home. We'll be waiting for you.'

'Mol–' Will cuts off as Molly ends the call, leaving him staring at his own reflection in the dark screen. His eyes are golden, almost feral in their intensity, and there's a high flush across his cheekbones. He sets the iPad aside and pads into the bathroom, rummaging through his toilet bag before producing a small white tablet.

He pops the last heat suppressant into his mouth and washes it back with a mouthful of tepid water, splashing some more on his face to cool himself down before grabbing his jacket and heading out of the empty motel room. A couple of Jack's lackeys had come round the day before to collect Duchess, and the dog was now headed to Maine where she would join the

rest of his pack. As soon as Dolarhyde was dead, Molly and the kids would return, and they would all be reunited.

The fact that he isn't sure if he'll join them sends a shiver down his spine, but he can't tell if it's fear or excitement. Probably both.

Get in the car. Drive to the hospital. Top floor. See Hannibal.

Will clutches the steering wheel tight, frustrated by the bustle of midday traffic. The sun is high in the sky, a bright disc of white heat, and the shadows shrink to the edges of where buildings block the light. His stomach clenches as he parks up in the visitor's bay outside the forbidding grey stone of the BSHCI.

I hope this is the last time I ever have to come back here, he thinks, trudging up the familiar steps and emptying his pockets before passing through the security gates. *Once we're gone, nothing will ever bring us back.*

He has no intention of letting Hannibal be caught again. He'll either be dead or –

He clamps down on the stray thought and gives a terse nod to the security officer waiting with his visitor's pass. Pockets his keys and cellphone as he heads for the stairs. Everyone else takes the elevator, but he's thrumming with energy, like lightning in his veins, and he needs to move. He needs to *feel* himself getting closer to the Alpha. Like predators of old; he's in the final sprint. A burst of energy before claiming his prize.

There are rows of silent mourners in the Normal Chapel. Votive candles flicker and the shifting air carries with it the heavy scent of incense and Alphan musk. Will's boots make soft sounds as he approaches the altar, where Hannibal stands resplendent in a neat plaid suit, his short hair combed to the side and burgundy eyes glinting in the low light.

The mourners all wear black and the women cover their hair. They are no one he recognizes, but their faces could change at any moment. These are the whims of Hannibal's imagination; his way of bringing the Mind Palace to life.

'I thought you said your goodbyes,' Hannibal says, calling out from the front of the chapel. Will swallows, forcing his hands to remain relaxed at his sides. He's no doubt the other man can read every line of tension in his body; the story it tells. The truth it reveals.

'We've one last goodbye between us.'

'You didn't just say goodbye though, did you?' Hannibal's eyes narrow just a fraction, displeasure mingling with smugness. 'That little extra bit at the end… What was that you said?'

Will clenches his jaw and looks off to the side for a moment, before stubbornly meeting the Alpha's gaze. Gold on red.

'You'd never have turned yourself in unless I rejected you.'

‘Yes.’ Hannibal hums, closing his eyes as if to savor it. ‘That extra bit.’ The Normal Chapel fades, leaving them in the cool, stale air of his cell. The Alpha is strapped to a wheeled trolley, arms bound tight across his chest. It’s the only way Will is allowed to share the same space as him. Breathe the same air. He’s close enough that he could reach out and touch him.

If he wanted to.

His fingers twitch inside the pockets of his jeans.

‘I believe that’s what they call a “mike-drop”,’ Hannibal adds, conversationally. He’s undeniably smug, now, his lips curled up into a sneer. ‘You dropped the mike, Will. But here you are, having to come back and pick it up again.’

Will wishes they could be alone. That the two Beta orderlies flanking the trolley could leave them alone. But they won’t. Chained and restrained as he is, Hannibal is still a threat and it’s their responsibility to keep him where he is. To move him if he agrees to the transfer.

It’ll be their job to muzzle him.

Will shifts on his feet, creasing his brow as he worries at his lower lip. He can smell himself; sweet, soft Omega. Even with the heat suppressant floating in his system, his natural scent is designed to soothe and calm. He tips his head a fraction, hinting at submission.

‘I knew you’d keep running,’ he says, looking at his Alpha, ‘if I kept chasing you. I knew you wanted me to know *exactly* where I could find you… when I needed to.’

‘And you did.’

Embarrassment grips Will’s throat. His stomach lurches, hitting the underside of his lungs. He takes a breath, forcing the organ back where it belongs, and says the words he’d rehearsed in his mind on the drive over.

‘I need you, Hannibal.’

He doesn’t know how the Alpha will react. More smugness; overwhelming and ugly? Or disbelief? Worse, perhaps, might be a lack of emotion. These are all the fears that plagued him since agreeing to the plan. Showing his vulnerability… admitting his own biological demand.

I need my Alpha.

What he doesn’t expect is the flash of raw emotion across Hannibal’s face, or the way it darkens his eyes as the pupils expand. The sharp hunger that carves itself into the lines of his face. And, somehow, the overwhelming sense that he did the right thing. That everything will be alright now, because he told his Alpha what he needs, and his Alpha will do everything in his power to provide for him.

I need you… and you need me. We’re connected. Always.

Aloud, Hannibal merely says,

‘Ding-dong, the Dragon’s *not* dead.’

Will steels himself and approaches. One step, then another. Hands still firmly clenched in his pockets.

‘He told you he wanted to meet you. Maybe that was a serious invitation.’ His voice doesn’t wobble. Stays firm and strong. Hannibal’s eyes stay on him. ‘After the big escape, you send a message to the Dragon in the personal ads, ask him for a rendezvous.’

‘He won’t go near a mail drop,’ Hannibal says. Will shrugs.

‘He might be curious enough to look at one. See if you sold him.’ He stares at the strange lights playing in Hannibal’s ruby eyes. ‘We chose a drop that can be watched from only a few places, from a long way off, and we’ll stake out the observation points.’

Hannibal narrows his eyes to glittering slits. He nods thoughtfully.

‘It sounds weak to you, even as you say it.’

The corners of Will’s mouth hitch up into a small smile. Yes, it does… but he continues anyway,

‘Secret Service has a setup they’ve never used. They’ll let us have it.’ He widens his golden-blue eyes and shows off the side of his throat. ‘You’re our best shot, Hannibal.’

Hannibal says nothing. Just watches and waits. Heat prickles the back of Will’s neck and his belly writhes, but it’s not with nerves. His pulse kicks up a notch with excitement. He smells his scent grow thicker, like honey and molasses, and releases a small, barely audible purr meant only for his Alpha to hear. Dips his head closer and glances up through his lashes at the other man, his lips forming the word he knows his mate has been longing to hear.

‘Please.’

And Hannibal smiles, a rare, genuine thing. There’s still smugness there, an all-too-familiar sight, but the Alpha puffs out his chest just a fraction and his eyes sparkle with humor.

That’s my boy.

Will sways, planting his feet to keep himself from rubbing up against his restrained mate. He could do it; a sharp word to the orderlies and they might let him use Hannibal for his own pleasure. But as much as the thought sends a flash of hot arousal kicking through him, he’s willing to wait. He wants Hannibal to himself, out of this room, this place and that fucking ugly prison uniform.

He wants his Alpha naked and straining for him, dappled with sweat and as desperate to please him as he is to come.

Hannibal’s nostrils flare and Will smiles. He knows his mate can smell his desire; can probably catch his thoughts, too. Good. Let him imagine. Let him crave.

They'll be together soon enough.

***

Dolarhyde calls him as he's waiting for the last sheaf of forms to be signed – permission to release Hannibal Lecter into federal custody, and of course deniability if he dies, kills anyone or escapes. Will doesn't recognize the number, but he can guess who it is. Dolarhyde has been using burner phones, always changing.

Muttering something vague about Molly and the kids, he ducks out of the room and away from Jack's prying eyes to answer the call in the corridor. Dolarhyde wastes no time and speaks as soon as the line connects.

'When will you have him?'

'This evening,' Will replies, his gut twisting with guilt at having used Molly as an excuse to speak to the very man who tried to kill her. 'We'll be travelling within the hour. South towards Richmond. Staying to back roads. An unmarked black van and two patrol cars.'

'I'll be there.' Dolarhyde hangs up, efficient as ever, and Will turns the phone over in trembling hands. His mind races ahead, picking through the shadows of the evening's journey to come until he can hear the creak of leather as he adjusts his bulk behind the wheel of a stolen police vehicle, and smell the burnt-sugar scent of his sick Omegan body. His hair is clipped short and practical, his strong legs encased in dark jeans. He wears sturdy workman's boots, but he knows how to move quietly in them.

Will imagines the gun on the passenger seat, the muzzle extended by a silencer. He will come up alongside the van, take out the officers escorting them to the safehouse and then drive away, picking up the trail once the area has been cleared, ready to track them to wherever they end up. His pulse kicks up a notch and his body thrums with excitement. He will kill Lecter slowly, painfully, and then he will consume him, absorb his strength, before turning to Will Graham, Lecter's pitiful Omega, and tackling him to the floor. His bare skin will still be slick with the Alpha's blood even as he mounts him, bites him and claims him as his own, as he –

With a shudder, Will comes back to himself. He wipes a hand over the cold sweat on his face and swallows the too-wet spit in his mouth. At the sound of his name, he turns, grateful for the distraction. Jack looks worried and he wonders how pale he is. How shaken he looks.

'I'm fine,' he lies, returning to the group. 'Let's get this over with, shall we?'

Jack's lips grow even thinner, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

'It's done,' he says. 'Lecter's being transferred now.' As Will nods and turns to leave, the Alpha reaches out and catches him by the elbow, uncharacteristically gentle. 'Are you sure about this?'

Will looks into the tired face of his friend and mentor. He doesn't try to smile; he respects Jack too much for that.

‘No,’ he says honestly. ‘But it’s the only option we have.’

Jack sighs and nods. He lets him go and shoves his hands into his pockets for something to do.

‘I hope you’re right,’ he says. ‘I’ll be waiting for your call. If we don’t hear from you by nine, we’ll follow. Be careful.’

Will looks back once over his shoulder as he walks away, following the group of officers towards the lobby where they will wait for the van containing Lecter.

‘You too, Jack.’

It’s unspoken, but they both know he’s saying goodbye. One way or another, he’s not coming back from this.

***

In the sharp gray light of the overcast afternoon, Alana and Margot Verger-Bloom descend the steps of the Verger mansion with their son, Mason. Gusts of wind from the swirling helicopter blades buffet their clothes and whip Margot’s long brown hair into a frenzy.

‘Hold tight to us,’ Alana says, giving her son’s small hand a comforting squeeze. ‘We’re going on an adventure.’

She exchanges a worried glance with Margot, her blue eyes thickly ringed with red. It’s her job to protect her family; her Omegan mate and their child. She will do whatever it takes to keep them safe, even if that means moving to another country and starting their life again.

Margot swings Morgan up into her arms, nuzzling his forehead and purring softly to reassure him. The security officers stand by with rifles at the ready, while Jurgen, their personal guard, carries the heavy designer suitcases towards the chopper ahead of them. He’ll remain by their side until they reach Canada, where a different guard will greet them for the next leg of their journey.

Alana has been planning this for years, always ready for the day when Hannibal Lecter roamed the world again. She has money, safehouses… and a contract waiting with a hired assassin. Hannibal will never have her family. He will never enact his promise to take them from her. Her Beta-self may have died in that kitchen, but the Alpha who rose to take her place is willing to do whatever it takes to eliminate the threat. One way or another, Hannibal will die.

***

The unmarked van smells like stale sweat, cleaning chemicals and cheap aftershave. Half the safety belts are broken and the engine rattles whenever the driver changes gear. They bounce their way along the interstate, Hannibal secured inside a straitjacket, chains, muzzle and a metal cage, Will secured between two burly Alpha federal officers. Nobody speaks, but Will can feel Hannibal’s purr in the back of his mind as they lock eyes.

He knows I'm planning something. He knows I'm working with the Dragon. He's too clever not to have figured it out. But does he know exactly what I plan to do? What I'm capable of?

One of the officers, clearly nervous of the stifling silence, checks that his rifle is loaded with the safety off.

Be careful, mylimasis. Will doesn't look away from his Alpha, but he can see the red slowly filling Hannibal's irises. *These men are ready to snap.*

It happens quickly. They hear sirens drawing closer, see a squad car flashing red and blue lights race past them, and Will knows it's Dolarhyde. He can imagine the *thwump* of air from the silencer, the sound of shattering glass and the barest huff of breath as the officer driving the lead car dies from a headshot. Tires screech across tarmac – the lead car must be careening out of control, forcing Dolarhyde to brake, and the van can't react fast enough to keep them from smashing into the bumper.

Metal crumples, glass cracks, and the lack of safety belts means Will and his fellow officers get thrown against the cage doors and sides of the van. Hannibal, bolted to his seat by loops of thick chains, lurches to one side but remains unscathed. The van heaves again as another bullet takes out the driver, and Will and the FBI agent are thrown, once more, into the metal sides as the van slams nose-first into the ditch flanking the road. There's a sickening crack, a jolt of pain, and when Will blinks back to consciousness it's just in time to see Dolarhyde open the back doors of the van and shoot the officer as he tries to bring his own gun up to fire. The agent's cry is cut short, his body collapsing across the metal bench, and Will can only stare as Dolarhyde rummages through the dead man's pockets for the keys to the cage.

Dolarhyde doesn't speak, but he does pat Will's cheek before unlocking Hannibal's cage door and loosening the first belt of the straitjacket. Will slumps, his limbs tingling and mouth tasting of copper, only dimply aware of Hannibal freeing himself from the restraints. The Alpha breathes a sigh of relief as he removes the muzzle, tilting his face up to the evening sky and breathing deep the fresh air.

'He's not going to kill us here,' he says to Will, discarding the jacket and muzzle next to his feet. 'What he wants to do requires something a *little* more private.'

He offers Will a hand as the Omega clambers out, and then leaves him to find his balance as he strides across to the second patrol car abandoned in the middle of the road. Will uses the time to grab the agent's handgun, slipping it into the back of his belt.

As Hannibal approaches the car, Dolarhyde reverses and turns around, driving away from the wreckage back the way he'd come. Hannibal opens the door to the first dead cop and continues, 'Y'know, Will, you worry too much. You'd be *much* more comfortable if you relaxed with yourself.'

He pulls the body out and dumps them on the verge, climbing behind the wheel himself. Will looks up and down the road. Dolarhyde's taillights are a distant blur of red, now. There's no one else around for miles. He feels the weight of the gun in his back pocket and wonders, just for a moment, if he should shoot Hannibal here and now. One shot and it would all be over.

His skin prickles and sweat gathers in his armpits, the base of his spine. He watches as the Alpha pulls the car up alongside him, opens the passenger door and kicks the other dead officer out to make room for him.

As if knowing what he was just thinking, Hannibal grins.

‘Going my way?’ he teases, leaning on one elbow and adopting a casual air. Like any regular Alpha picking up the blushing Omega he was Courting. Will hates that it makes his stomach flip. Hates that a part of him likes it. But, instead of fighting it, he just sighs, looking around the carnage one last time, and then climbs into the car.

‘Yeah,’ he says, resting his aching head back and closing his eyes. ‘I guess I am.’

***

They drive for another couple of hours. Will drifts, his muscles unlocking after weeks of tension as Hannibal’s scent slowly fills the car. He’d forgotten how nice it is, like sandalwood and musk. Something earthy and rich that makes him dizzy, even as stress leeches from him and his own scent sweetens in response to the pheromones of his mate.

Hannibal seems content to drive in silence, not pressuring Will to speak or insisting on listening to the radio. Will’s grateful for the quiet, even though he keeps finding questions lingering on the tip of his tongue, only to be forgotten moments later as he sinks back down into darkness.

Eventually, Hannibal turns off onto a rough track. He switches off the lights and slows to avoid jolting Will too much. It looks like they’re headed for the cliff edge, but then Will sees a sleek, modern house perched on the edge of the bluff. It’s built on two levels, the lower rooms carved into the rock itself, leaving the upper floors squatting on the cliff to look out over the ocean. Hannibal pulls into a large garage and cuts the engine, throwing Will a small smile before stepping out to approach the house from the side.

Will follows, unable to do anything else, and finds himself in a small courtyard that abruptly ends with a cliff edge. There are low shrubs and large rocks set about the area, as well as a well-maintained woodpile and bench.

‘Is this yours?’ he asks, glancing at the Alpha. Hannibal nods, his gaze somewhat distant as he takes in the surroundings. Will steps closer to the edge and peers down, his belly twisting at how high they are. It’s almost a sheer drop from here to the crashing waves below, hundreds of feet of slate rock and limestone.

‘The bluff is eroding,’ Hannibal says. ‘There was more land when I was here with Abigail. More still when I was here with Miriam Lass.’

Will looks at him, feeling a flicker of unease, and turns back to the drop with a sigh.

‘And now you’re here with me.’

‘And the bluff is still eroding. You and I are suspended over the roiling Atlantic. Soon, all this will be lost to the sea.’ Hannibal steps away, leaving Will for the moment, and retrieves a small key from under an innocuous rock. ‘Come,’ he calls, opening the door. ‘We can talk more inside.’

He disappears inside, leaving Will to spare one last look at the setting sun and the crashing waves. The nature around him has no care for the turmoil he feels inside, and he takes small comfort in imagining the slate rock being slowly chipped away with every crash of waves against the pebbled shore. The cold wind buffets his hair, and he can taste salt when he licks his lips.

Slipping his hand into the front pocket of his jeans, he fiddles with the edge of his cellphone. He’d agreed to send a message to Jack when they’d reached their safehouse, or to switch the GPS on so the FBI could track him if a message wasn’t possible. But instead of drawing the phone out and turning it on, he pushes the little device further into the pocket and leaves it there. This is something he has to do alone.

Steeling himself, he follows the path Hannibal took and enters the house. It’s cool inside, but Will can already see the glow of a lit fire in the sitting area. The sight makes him ache, because he knows why the Alpha insists on being warm. He remembers seeing flashes of a freezing Lithuanian winter, a small boy huddled inside a threadbare blanket, chilled to the bone. Remember’s sharing Hannibal’s fear as his little sister shakes beside him, her wet cough rattling her lungs as she tries to sip the broth he feeds her.

No; Hannibal will never be cold again.

Will removes his jacket and hangs it on the rack, taking his time to look around. The Alpha is nowhere in sight, so he indulges himself inspecting the modern kitchen and minimalist dining area. The surfaces are all clean, not a speck of dust anywhere. Someone has been here to clean and care for the property during Hannibal’s incarceration. It doesn’t take much to guess it must be Chiyoh.

The sky is streaked with red as the sun sinks below the distant horizon. The house has been built specifically for the view, the sitting area benefiting the most from the floor-to-ceiling windows. Pale couches cluster around an artistic coffee table, inviting long discussions. Will follows Hannibal’s scent from the living area to a set of wooden stairs leading down towards the bedrooms. It’s darker here; Hannibal hasn’t turned on any of the lights, but Will can still make out the art on the walls and the sculptures in the corners. There’s only one door left ajar, and as he steps closer he hears the sound of running water.

Pushing into the master bedroom, Will darts his eyes around at the large bed and silk covers, the wardrobes and plush armchairs, the tapestry on the far wall and the window hung with thick velvet drapes and pale gauze. The white prison jumpsuit left in a heap on the floor.

This is the only room with a view of the sea, and Will sees that the sky is now bruised purple and blue. The first star twinkles in the twilight gloom, the sight of it wrenching his heart.

I looked up at the night sky there. Orion above the horizon and, near it, Jupiter. I wondered if you could see it, too. I wondered if our stars were the same.

His fingers move to unbutton his shirt as if pulled by invisible strings. He toes off his boots, removes his socks and shimmies out of his jeans. Sets the gun on the top of the pile and covers it with his boxers. He can smell his scent rising, a light, sweet musk. His flesh pebbles and he closes his eyes, sinking into the warmth of the river in his mind. The bond stretches between them like a shimmering golden thread. Flexing and fraying, but never breaking. Even Hannibal's attempts to free him hadn't worked. He'd torn it, yes, but not snapped it. They are inseparable.

Will sighs, a hand drifting across his belly. He traces the scar there, faint now with age but still tender when pressed. Hannibal is dangerous. He knows it to his core, and it terrifies him. But the thing that scares him more is that he *understands.* He understands why Hannibal does the things he does. Why he is so desperate for Will to join him in the darkness. He understands… and he accepted it a long time ago.

You broke my mind apart because you loved me. You tried to save me, the only way you knew how. Through pain and violence and deceit… You turned yourself in so I would always know where you were.

He can't hide from it anymore. Hannibal is *his* Alpha. *His* to coax and control. *His* to parry. They are partners in their dance, even if it sometimes leaves them shredded.

I still love you. I'm still Bonded to you… and you to me.

His eyes, when he opens them, are molten gold. His scent sharpens with the first hint of slick and he feels heat gather like an iron on the nape of his neck. For the first time since leaving Maine, he lets himself touch it. Acknowledge it.

His crest. Regrown. Healed. Soft, ridged skin at the top of his spine. It must be flushed red with how hot it is. Will trembles as he touches it, feather-light and shaking. Desire licks his veins and he huffs out a breath, tasting more of his sugar-sweet scent rise to fill the air around him.

Pushing the door to the adjoining bathroom, he sees Hannibal in the opulent shower, face tilted to the spray, lean body drenched in hot, soapy water. The air is foggy, but he still spots the Alpha's nostrils flare. Watches as Hannibal turns, crimson eyes stalking his approach.

Without a word, Will accepts the wet hand and steps into the shallow basin. Everything is marble and gold, dripping with condensation from the heat of the shower. Hannibal's skin is mottled pink, shiny with moisture. Will doesn't hesitate; he reaches out and grabs Hannibal by the back of his neck, yanking him down into a hungry kiss. Their teeth clack before Hannibal regains his balance and deepens the kiss, lips parting and tongues pressing. Will hums, sliding his hands up the Alpha's wet torso, feeling him breathe.

Hannibal cradles Will close, sharing heat and moisture without dousing him. His big hands settle between his shoulder blades and at the dip of his back, pulling Will forwards even as he rocks his hips. Will shudders, turning them blindly to press Hannibal up against the cold tiles. He swallows the hiss of shock down with another mouthful of spit and water, his own back lashed by the hot spray. Knocking Hannibal's knees apart, he slots his thigh between them and lines their erections up so they slip and slide against each other.

Hannibal groans, his fingers tightening and releasing. Will can tell he's fighting the urge to reverse their positions; to pin him face-first into the wall and cover his back, claim his neck between his teeth and bite even as he fucks deep and knots him. The image sends another wave of scorching arousal through him, and he breaks the kiss to bite at the round of Hannibal's shoulder, his hips thrusting forwards.

'Hand,' he mumbles, scrabbling for one of Hannibal's arms. The Alpha obeys, seemingly helpless to do anything but what Will wants. Will directs his grip to their lengths, guiding Hannibal to hold them both and begin stroking. He pants against Hannibal's swollen lips, his eyes screwed shut as pleasure creates an inferno inside him.

'Will…' Hannibal's whisper is cut off by Will's teeth in his lower lip. He stills, acquiescing to the other man. Will can't help but think of Bedelia, whispering poison about aggression being an effective means of maintaining order in a relationship. Can't help but think she's right; that he and Hannibal have an endless push and pull of aggression.

A zero sum game.

'I hate you,' he mutters, soothing the Alpha's bleeding lip with a suck and another kiss. 'I love you. I *hate* that I still love you.'

'I know.' Hannibal's hips stutter with pleasure, his throat swallowing back a whine. 'Will…'

'Come on.' Will keeps one hand on Hannibal's wrist, moving him faster and faster, their bodies racing to completion. He uses the other to guide Hannibal's free hand to the nape of his neck, his body seizing in pleasure the moment the Alpha touches his crest. With a hoarse shout, he comes harder than he has in years. It's blinding. Overwhelming. He can't breathe through it. Can't think. The world tips and his splintered mind cracks once more, spilling darkness into him. Dimly, he feels Hannibal jolt, his grip tightening instinctively as his own release paints stripes across Will's belly and chest.

Will keens, his knees giving out as Hannibal continues to squeeze his crest. The Alpha growls, low and possessive, spinning him and pressing his back against the wall. Will lifts himself as Hannibal scoops him up under a thigh, locking his legs around the Alpha's narrow waist and meeting him for another bruising kiss. Hannibal strokes the ridged flesh, sending shockwaves of desire and euphoria through him, reducing Will to a whimpering mess. He hangs on to Hannibal's shoulders, fingers in his wet hair and strings of spit still connecting their mouths when they part to gasp for breath.

'Will.' The way Hannibal says his name is like a prayer. Will shivers, staring down into his mate's scarlet eyes.

'M'in Heat,' he whispers, eyes half-slipping shut again as Hannibal rolls his hips up. The Alpha's not hard again, not quite yet, but his body is definitely ramping up for more and Will feels his own erection pressing between their bodies. 'S'first time in years.'

'I've missed you so much,' Hannibal breathes, releasing his crest to cup the side of his face. 'My beautiful mate.'

‘Dragon’s coming,’ Will says, rocking down as he feels slick slither down his thighs and soak the Alpha. ‘Fuck… Hannibal…’

‘I’m here.’ Hannibal kisses him again before nuzzling his jawline. ‘I’m right here.’

‘We don’t have long.’ Will nuzzles him back, snuffling along his cheek before licking a burning stripe up the thin ridge of scar tissue on the Alpha’s throat. Hannibal stiffens, groaning with pleasure before tipping his head back and submitting to his mate. Will nibbles along the edges of his Alphan crest, reveling in the way Hannibal nails dig into his skin, hard enough to bruise but stopping just shy of drawing blood. Then, just as the other man seems ready to fuck up into his waiting body, he pulls back. ‘Bed.’

Hannibal nods, looking dazed. He releases Will to stand on his own feet again and slaps a hand down on the shower lever, shutting off the water. They barely separate, hands roving and mouths meeting as they make their way, dripping wet, to the bed. Hannibal pushes Will to lie back and drapes his larger body over him, welcomed between the cradle of Will’s thighs as the Omega brings his knees up and opens for him.

‘In,’ Will manages, canting his hips up and arching his back to present for his mate. ‘Hannibal… in. Fuck me.’

‘Will…’ Hannibal is helpless to obey, gathering up the sugar-sweet slippery slick and coating his length with it. Their scents rise in the warming air, a perfect mix of heavy and sweet musk, and he bows his head to press a reverent kiss to Will’s chest, right over his heart, just as he pushes inside. Will sucks in a sharp breath, clutching at Hannibal’s back at the sudden feeling of his mate filling him. His body adjusts quickly to the intrusion, muscles rippling as he locks his ankles around Hannibal’s waist once again, urging him deeper. Hannibal groans and obliges, sinking to the hilt before rolling his hips and withdrawing almost all the way, just to hear Will mewl and huff as he fills him again.

Will clenches his teeth and locks eyes with the Alpha, meeting him thrust for frantic thrust. Sweat beads on his forehead and gathers behind his knees, in the small of his back and under his arms. His scent is heavy with Heat pheromones, his body crying out for his Alpha to rut, to fight for him, catch him, fuck him and knot him until there’s nothing but pleasure. His throat rattles with a purr, matched by Hannibal’s deeper growl, and he spreads his palm across the Verger brand marring his mate’s back, reclaiming it with his scent.

‘*Mine*,’ he snarls, his eyes blazing gold. Hannibal lifts up onto his knees, bowing over Will as he forces him to fold his body, spreading his legs even wider and fucking deeper into him. He braces with one hand on the mattress and releases the other to grip Will by his crest, filling his Omega’s body, vision and mind with the smell and feel of him.

‘*Mine*,’ he replies, watching as Will’s pupils blow wide. ‘You’re *mine*, Will. You always have been.’

‘Yours,’ Will gasps, his skin tingling as lightning melts his veins. ‘Yours… Hannibal…’

‘Come,’ Hannibal says, squeezing the crest again. ‘Come for me, Will, just like this.’

Will shudders, unable to close his eyes, unable to look away from Hannibal's hungry face as pleasure spirals and crashes through him. He can hear the strangled whimpers spilling from his parted lips, feels tears spill and roll backwards into his damp hair, but he can't do anything about it because he's *still* coming. It's an endless loop, cresting like the waves that slam into the shore hundreds of feet below them. His head pounds with his pulse, thundering with nowhere else to go, and he watches as Hannibal's form shifts, skin darkening and eyes turning white as wicked antlers creep over his head to cage him in.

The wendigo croons to his own shadow, beckoning it to the surface until Will is sure he can see black smoke writhe in the air with every exhale. He can hear the rushing of a stream, the lapping of water against his tattered psyche, and feels Hannibal cup his face to keep the cracked pieces of him together.

Only you, Will. It's only ever been you.

'Stay with me,' Hannibal murmurs, dipping his head to press soft kisses to Will's lips. 'Stay here with me.'

'W-where else would I go?' Will replies, his teeth chattering as his body flushes hot and cold, shivers chasing each other down his spine. He doesn't even know if Hannibal has come yet; he thinks he can feel the Alpha's knot inside him, locking them together, but it's all too much, it's *everything* all at once and he can't parse out what's real. 'I c-can't get you out of my head.'

'It's alright, Will.' Hannibal cradles him in his arms, engulfing him in his scent, crowding him down into the damp covers and soaking up his heat until the inferno becomes more tolerable. 'I'm right here. Just let go.'

Will presses his face into the crook of Hannibal's neck, shaking and panting. He wants to laugh, to argue that the last time he let go his mind was ripped apart by the very Alpha now comforting him.

'I will if you will.'

Hannibal chuckles, pressing kisses to his damp temple, his forehead, his flushed cheeks. He's calm for now, but his scent is thick with rut hormones, his Alphan body responding to Will's Heat, preparing him to fight, to fuck. To protect.

'I would love nothing more than to sink into the abyss with you,' he says, shifting his weight so as not to crush the other man. 'But I believe we're due company.'

Will bares his teeth, clamping down on the knot that's definitely still inside him. Hannibal hisses, rocking his hips into the tight embrace, his muscles shaking. He ducks his head, giving Will access to the front of his throat again, and Will soothes himself by sucking on the tender skin of the Alphan crest. He only gives it up when he feels Hannibal shrink and slip out of him, and nips at the other man's jaw before allowing him to rise. His Heat has subsided for now, eased by sex so simmer just beneath the surface. But it won't be long before it consumes him and Hannibal is right; the Dragon will be here soon.

‘Are you hungry?’ Hannibal asks, offering his hand to help Will up. Will presses close, his skin still blisteringly hot and his insides aching with emptiness.

‘Not for food.’

Hannibal turns, kissing him again and stroking through his dark curls. Will tips his head into the caress, even though he knows it can’t last long.

‘When this is done, you and I will have all the time in the world.’ The Alpha gestures to one of the dressers. ‘There are some clothes in there that you might like.’

Will narrows his eyes, rubbing shivers away when Hannibal leaves him to fetch clothes of his own. He opens the first drawer and pulls out a pair of briefs, the expensive material impossibly soft against his skin. Deciding that his own underwear is probably damp with slick, he slips into them and rummages around for equally luxurious socks. He’ll still wear his jeans and shirt, but it can’t hurt to accept these small items.

When he turns around to fetch his clothes from the chair, his breath catches at the sight of Hannibal in sleek trousers and a light cashmere sweater. The Alpha has paused with his eyes closed, a small smile tugging at his lips as he luxuriates in the feel of expensive fabric again. Will remembers how uncomfortable the asylum uniforms had been, all cheap detergents and rough cotton. As good as Hannibal’s imagination is, there’s nothing that compares to the true feeling of silk and suede.

Hannibal tips his head towards Will and opens his eyes, his smiling becoming a mischievous grin. He reaches for the matching blazer in the closet and shrugs into it, making such a show of it stretching over his shoulders that Will snorts.

‘Peacocking for me, Dr Lecter?’ He pulls his shirt off the pile first and their eyes both drop to the gun sitting on the pants. Hannibal stays very still as Will deliberately bends to pick it up, his slim fingers closing around the handle in a way that feels right. ‘Do you think I’m going to shoot you?’

Hannibal considers him and the weapon in his grip. He fusses with his outfit, straightening the cuffs and brushing away creases.

‘If you were going to shoot me,’ he says, ‘you’d have done it on the roadside. You wouldn’t have waited until now.’

Will’s throat clicks when he swallows. He can feel his pulse in his fingertips. He raises the pistol, aiming at Hannibal’s chest…

And then lowers it. Sets it aside while he tugs on his jeans. The buckle clinks, the only thing to break the silence. Then,

‘You’re right.’ He offers the Alpha a grim smile, tilting his head up in a way that is both defiant and somehow submissive, his eyes flashing in the low light. ‘I’m not going to shoot you.’

‘But you don’t know if you’ll save me,’ Hannibal says, collecting Will’s shirt for him and holding it out. ‘When the Dragon comes.’

Will accepts the shirt, buttoning it silently, and holsters the gun in the back of his jeans. He leans closer to Hannibal for a moment, savoring the scent of him, and presses a gentle kiss to his cheek.

‘Let’s have a drink.’

‘Communion wine?’ Hannibal muses, capturing Will’s hand so they walk together from the room. ‘A final taste before the end?’

Will smiles, allowing his mate to see the sadness in his eyes. The turbulence of his emotions. He wants so desperately for them to be together, and his body is screaming at him to shed his clothes and fuck until there’s another baby in his belly, but pregnancy will never again be possible for him; the curved blade of the *Koboi* knife saw to that.

‘I don’t think either of us can predict what’s going to happen,’ he replies. ‘Everything that happens has already happened in another life.’ He lifts their hands and kisses the Alpha’s knuckles. ‘We just have to see how this one ends.’

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Jack Crawford steps from his car and surveys the scene before him with a heavy heart. FBI agents and local officers swarm the area, lit by headlights and flickering blues and reds. Everything is a mess of dead bodies and crushed vehicles, and Hannibal and Will are nowhere to be found. There’s been no message, no signal to ping and no inclination of what they’re planning next. As much as he tries to tell himself it’s a ruse, he can’t ignore the cold dread in the pit of his stomach.

Come on, Will. Tell me where you are…

He just hopes it’s not too late.

***

‘When did you know we were still bonded?’ Hannibal asks, moving around in the kitchen as Will stares out of one of the large windows into the darkness of the night. ‘Did you know? Or did you not want to believe?’

‘I convinced myself of a lot of things while you were gone,’ Will says softly, peering out into the shadowed courtyard, past his pale and golden-eyed reflection. ‘I convinced myself I had a life. A family.’

‘You do have a family. You have me. You have our children.’ Hannibal selects the bottle of Malbec he’s been saving since the day Will bought it for him. A gift, in lieu of staying for his dinner party, and carries it, along with two wine glasses, over to the piano in the dining area. ‘You’re playing games with yourself in the dark of the moon.’

His gaze lingers on the corkscrew sat on the side. It gleams in the low light. Inviting. Menacing.

‘It wasn't surprising that I heard from the Great Red Dragon,’ he continues, dismissing the urge to do any harm with it. Not to Will, anyway. ‘Was it surprising when *you* heard from him?’

He glances up from polishing the glasses, just in time to see Will hesitate. It’s a brief pause, but he misses nothing when it becomes to his beloved.

‘Yes and no,’ Will admits. He moves away from the window, circling Hannibal and keeping his side to him. It’s a defensive position, but Hannibal can see the tension in him as he holds himself from submitting.

Hannibal hums. Inspects the wine glass for fingerprints and gives it another cursory wipe before setting it down.

‘Do you intend to watch him kill me?’ he asks, schooling his voice and features to neutrality. They are like comets in the night sky, both of them burning, both with the power to wreak destruction. Will’s face is softly flushed, his shirt collar damp with sweat as his body hurtles towards a full Heat, and Hannibal feels his own body ripple with the expectation of a Rut.

‘I intend to watch him change you,’ Will purrs. Hannibal considers that, even as he picks up the corkscrew. Instead of darting forwards and plunging it into the Omega’s neck, he uses the sharp point to cut the foil securing the top of the wine bottle. Smiles over at his mate as he unwinds it.

‘My compassion for you is inconvenient, Will.’ He has no doubt his Omega would watch the Dragon torture him. Feels a thrill when he can’t be sure Will won’t let him die.

I’ve never been able to predict you, mylimasis.

Will snorts.

‘Yeah, well, if you’re partial to beef products it is *inconvenient* to be compassionate toward a cow.’

Hannibal chuckles. He has missed his mate’s sharp tongue. He pops the cork and raises it to capture the smell of the wine. Perfectly balanced. He collects up the two glasses and offers one to Will.

‘Save yourself, kill them all?’

Will holds still as Hannibal pours him a glass of wine. His edges are blurring; he’s being poured into the crystal just as surely as the red liquid. Shifting and falling like the fine grains of sand through an hourglass. It wasn’t that long ago he was chopping wood in Maine. Now he’s enjoying wine with his former mate – *current mate* – in a cliffside house and waiting for a murderer to arrive. Thinking about killing Hannibal, about surrendering to him… A thousand thoughts flitting through the abandoned hallways of his mind.

‘I don’t know if I can save myself,’ he confesses, staring at Hannibal’s chest as he mulls over the words given breath and life. ‘And maybe that’s just fine.’

It’s a strange sort of surrendering. A conscious choice to stop fighting, like a drowning man might decide to stop swimming against the current and allow himself to be dragged under. Will’s pulse quickens and his vision wavers. He has no idea where he’ll end up. If he’ll survive tonight. But whatever happens will be because he made his choice.

‘"No greater love hath man than to lay down his life for a mate."’ Hannibal’s smile is small. He pours wine that he no longer thinks he’ll be able to taste. Feels the weight of the moment across his shoulders. The importance of it in the steady thump of his heart. And he knows, if he had to make a choice this evening, that it wouldn’t be a choice at all.

He will die to protect Will.

A moment passes. Will sighs.

‘He’s watching us now.’

‘I know.’ As Hannibal brings his glass up to scent the wine, there’s a faint *thwip* and the window behind him shatters. The bottle he’s holding smashes, pouring burgundy liquid everywhere.

Will’s reaction is delayed, shock robbing him of the ability to do more than blink. It all happens so fast. Hannibal drops the neck of the bottle and looks down at the stain on his sweater. They both see the bloom of blood mingling with the wine stain. He’s been shot, right through the abdomen. A crippling wound and an agonizing way to die.

As he falls to his knees and slumps to the side, Francis Dolarhyde strides out of the blackness, a shadow made human. His eyes are twin suns in his face, glowing a deep, warped amber. The larger Omega steps over the window frame, holding his gun up, his aim steady as he points it at Will’s chest.

‘Don’t run yet,’ he says. ‘I’m going to catch you.’

Will holds his hands out to the sides, low and calm, a sign of surrender. He takes a cautious step backwards and then waits as Francis approaches the fallen Alpha. Hannibal is panting, his breathing fast and shallow as he applies pressure to the seeping wound at his side. He’s half-propped against the leg of the piano, his face pale and sweaty as he fights shock.

‘Hello, Francis.’

Francis circles him, coming into view. He looks down at his prize and speaks, with the clarity and confidence of a man who knows who he is.

‘Hello, Dr Lecter.’

Will looks down at Hannibal, taking a sip of his wine as he takes in his Alpha’s suffering. It’s exquisite, in its own way. He burns with righteous wrath.

‘I’m so happy you chose life, Francis.’ Hannibal’s scarlet eyes flick up to the Omega. He shivers, his muscles flexing. Swallows and adds in a husky growl, ‘Suicide is the enemy.’ Another panting breath. Francis crouches before him, drinking in the sight of the Alpha on the brink of collapse. Hannibal continues, ‘You were seized by a fantasy world… with the brilliance and freshness, and immediacy of childhood. It took you a step beyond alone.’

Francis pulls the duffel bag off his shoulder. Sets it down by his side and withdraws a tripod camera from it.

‘I’m gonna film your death, Dr Lecter,’ he says. ‘As dying, you meld with the strength of the Dragon. Then, I’ll claim your Omega as my own.’

Hannibal huffs, a trickle of blood now seeping from between his lips.

‘It’s a glorious and rather *discomforting* idea.’ He glances up at Will. Is his mate really going to let this happen? Is this the end?

Does Will know what will happen to him, if Hannibal dies? That he will most likely follow?

We’re conjoined, you and I. Bound by fate and circumstance.

Will stares back at him, impassive, impossible to read, and Hannibal feels a flicker of true uncertainty.

‘Watching the film will be wonderful,’ Francis continues, fixated on Hannibal’s face. Not noticing, perhaps, the silence exchange between the two men. The silent plea sent up by the Alpha, for his mate to show mercy. ‘But not as wonderful as the act itself.’

It happens all at once. Francis flicks open a little knife by his side. Hannibal looks up at Will again, catching the way he slowly moves his hand back towards the gun at his belt.

And then Francis strikes. He’s fast; too fast for Will to predict. Slams the little knife into Will’s *face*, sending him staggering back a pace. Hannibal’s lips pull back from his teeth, his mind clouding over with the red fog of Rut.

Will can’t even gasp. It isn’t the pain of the blade entering his face that surprises him. Isn’t the crunch of cartilage and *teeth* leaving his gums that makes his stomach twist. It’s Dolarhyde’s *strength*. It’s the fact that he lifts him from his feet, dangling him like a hooked fish, before tossing him through the shattered window, as casually as one might toss a piece of garbage from the window of a moving car.

Instinct and training makes him roll as he lands, and the surge of adrenaline blocks the feeling of his elbow cracking on the paving. Will lies on his back, gasping for breath that bubbles through the blood coating his mouth. When his tongue moves, it slices open on the tip of the blade protruding from beneath his right eye socket and he feels dizzy.

He senses more than sees the Dragon advancing on him, but he can’t get out of the way in time. Francis grabs him, dragging him to his knees, and Will wrenches the knife free, spilling

a jet of blood from his face. He swings his arm back with a desperate ferocity and buries the weapon into the side of Dolarhyde's knee.

The Dragon screams, and staggers enough that Will thinks he can get free, but then the other Omega wraps his hand around the handle and tugs it out. He grabs for Will, sinking the little blade deep into the muscle of Will's right shoulder, trying to sever the tendons or puncture a lung.

Will gasps, coughing on blood. His vision shakes, reality shivering as pain threatens to overwhelm him. He sags, allowing Dolarhyde to wrench him up onto his knees to break his neck. Grey spots swarm, clouding the edges of his sight with darkness. But something changes; Dolarhyde hesitates, staggers…

Alpha.

Hannibal lunges for the larger Omega. Wraps himself around Francis's back. He's snarling, his eyes furious red, scent thick with Rut. He grips Francis in a headlock, an arm across his trachea to crush his windpipe.

But Francis, not as wounded, gets an arm up and twists, sending the Alpha sprawling. Hannibal rolls, over and over, until he smacks into a rock near the edge of the cliff, the breath knocked out of him.

Will falls onto his front, trying to stagger away as Dolarhyde abandons him. The Dragon stalks after Hannibal, and, as Will gets his arms under him to push himself to his feet, he sees a pair of great leathery wings unfurl from Dolarhyde's shoulders. The sight of them stills his heart, but he doesn't pause for long. He can't. His Alpha needs him. Bracing himself, he tugs the knife from his shoulder, keening at the pain and spilling more blood down his shirt.

Hannibal hisses at the sound of his Omega in pain. He's up on his feet now, but only because Francis has wrapped both hands tight around his throat to choke the life from him. He stares into the twitching, distorted Omegan face, at the sweaty brow and bared teeth, and smiles. Smiles because, behind him, Will is getting to his feet, the knife in his hand.

Glorious.

Red-streaked and wild, Will's golden eyes gleam with a feral lust. The sight of him sears Hannibal's soul, sending shivers down his spine. His mate moves with deadly precision and speed, stabbing the knife straight into Dolarhyde's kidney.

That's it, mylimasis. We'll kill him together.

Francis drops Hannibal with a strangled howl. He spins, backhanding Will across the face and sending him skidding onto his back. Before the Alpha can retaliate, he kicks Hannibal square in the ribs and knocks him into a pile of chopped wood.

Hannibal lands hard, gasping for air, but his hand lands on the polished handle of the axe, and elation sends a warm thrill through him. Even through the haze of Rut fury, he knows to reach for it. To use a weapon as well as his fangs.

The movement distracts Francis, who has turned to advance on Will, but the Dragon is too late. Hannibal swings, slicing the tendon in the Omega's leg. Blood flows, but that is not its purpose. It makes Francis stumble, his leg buckling, allowing Will to strike. Another stab to the kidneys. As Francis arches in agony, Hannibal swings again.

This is *their* dance, *their* design, and it is breathtaking. The axe nicks the next tendon and the Dragon staggers. He's only standing through pure animal fury, but, as he drags himself a safe distance from the two circling men his face registers the fear, the realization, that he is no longer the predator, but *their* prey. He knows they are going to kill him.

And Hannibal, panting blood and filled with fire, cannot help but stare as Will rises, magnificent, to lock eyes with him. Red and gold. Alpha and Omega.

Together.

They strike as one. Hannibal uses his Rut to leap onto Francis's back again, wrapping arms and legs tight around him. Francis rears, trying to buck him off, and Hannibal sinks his teeth into the soft flesh of his throat. And Will, his dark, powerful Will, after all these years of repressing his true nature, makes his choice. His Omega drives the knife deep into the Dragon's belly, the same way Hannibal gutted him all those years ago. Wrenches, carving Dolarhyde open, and spilling steaming entrails out into the cool night.

Hannibal tears a chunk of flesh from the front of Francis's throat, swallowing his prize, and allows the dying man to fall.

It's over. And they have won.

Francis crashes to his knees, his mouth open wide in a silent scream. Will sees the wings falter. Sees them droop. And then, as the light fades from Dolarhyde's eyes, they disappear, because Francis is just a man. Not even that anymore; nothing but a body as he tumbles to the ground, his arms wide in supplication and blood spreading like ink across the flagstones.

The Great Red Dragon is dead. He's dead, and they are alive… They are so very, very *alive*.

He shudders. His body is on fire. It melts his bones, boils his blood. His head pounds and the world shakes. He feels lighter than air. Drunk with power and boundless potential, but also calm. As though the broken pieces of himself have finally, *finally* come together and he can be whole.

This is my becoming.

Pain brushes the edges of his consciousness. He doesn't care. Every sense is heightened, and pain is nothing but sensation, firing in his brain. Hannibal thinks of it that way, too. Are they his thoughts, or his Alpha's? Their minds have already bled so far into each other's that there's no telling where he ends and the other begins.

The air parts for him as he lifts his hand. Will stares at the blood coating his skin, staining his pores and settling in the creases between his fingers. He can hear his heart, a defiant thunder in his chest. He can hear every rasp of breath, feel the whistle as it flows through the flap of

his torn cheek. All he can taste is copper. All he smells is Hannibal's musk and his own sugary scent.

He's so *hungry*.

'It really does look black in the moonlight,' he purrs, dropping his head to stutter out a gasping laugh. The movement tugs on his cut, and the smile quickly fades to a grimace as his belly cramps. He feels slick trickle down his thighs and bows his head as the emptiness churns his gut. Holds his hand out, asking for help. Knows his Alpha will be there.

Hannibal reaches for him and holds him tight, pulling him up into an embrace. He nuzzles Will's curls, scenting and marking him with his own scent in turn. Will feels tears prick his eyes, threatening to spill, and he winds a hand in the soft cashmere of Hannibal's jumper.

'See?' Hannibal's voice is rough with Rut, but his words slide down Will's spine like molten fire, spreading out through his core until he's quivering. 'This is all I ever wanted for you, Will. For both of us.'

Will turns with his Alpha to look down at the Dragon. At the ruin they have made together. He rocks his hips forward, grinding against the answering hardness in Hannibal's pants, and stares once again at his mate.

He can't help but stare. Beyond the sharp cheekbones and gleaming eyes, beyond the thin, cruel lips and sun-starved skin, he sees *Hannibal*. He sees *himself*.

Untamable. Unstoppable. *Devastating*.

'It's beautiful.'

Hannibal trembles. His heart swells, threatening to burst. He presses his cheek to the top of Will's head, engulfing him in his heat and his scent as the other man hugs him close, and winds his fist in Will's stained shirt.

He is never letting him go.

Will snakes an arm up around Hannibal's neck, pulling him impossibly closer. There's no time. It has to be now. Now, before he loses the nerve.

I don't know if I can save myself.

He pushes, one last, desperate attempt to save the world from them both, and they are falling. Tumbling into the roiling Atlantic. Wind rips the breath from his lungs. His ears scream protest. They hit the jagged edge of the rockface, shattering bones and tearing great swaths of skin. Break apart on the impact, skidding and rolling in an avalanche of pebbles before hitting the water.

'Will…'

It's *freezing*. Will tries to suck in a breath but he's pulled under by the current. Chokes as he fights to stay afloat. The Memory Palace crumbles, a great stone cathedral shaking apart at

the seams. Water rushes to fill the corridors and screaming fills his head. Fetid breath and rotting teeth, tar-stained fingers pinching at his arms, testing his fat… The well-lit displays darken, and the last thing Will sees is bloodied snow, milk teeth in a bowl and a scream, short and sharp, before the thud of an axe.

Mischa.

Hannibal staggers as Will slumps against him. The Omega is feverish, eyes glassy and cheeks flushed as he begins to shake. Holding him up under the chin does him no good, so he follows him to the ground and pushes his face into the dirt, covering his back with his larger body. Everything tastes of copper and the sugar of Will's slick, which glistens on his thighs when Hannibal unbuckles the Omega's belt and pulls his jeans down. He watches as Will mindlessly presents, back arched and hips up, whining for his mate to fuck him.

Hannibal purrs to soothe him, sinking to his knees behind him and laying a hand on the base of his spine. He trembles, his wounds seeping crimson rivulets that bloom across the ruin of Will's white shirt before dripping to the stone floor. Will writhes, crooning and calling to him, enticing him even closer, and Hannibal fumbles with his own pants, barely pausing to shove them down before guiding himself into the smooth, scorching heat of his mate's body.

Will keens, shoving back to take Hannibal as deep as he can go. The breath punches out of him and he judders, sweat and blood coating his face. Hannibal snarls, bowing over his Omega, fangs ripping the cotton of his ruined shirt in a mindless attempt to get at his crest. There's no rhythm at first, just the frantic push and pull as they tumble into oblivion, sinking beneath the waves of pleasure, and then there *is*, and it's *so* much better. Will gasps, screwing his eyes shut. His mind splits open, doors wide to Hannibal's thoughts.

White curtains billow in the frescoed bedroom. Hannibal floods the once abandoned corridors of his Memory Palace with light and air, banishing dust and restoring everything to lustrous beauty. They're moving on the flagstones of the clifftop courtyard, and on the floor of the Norman Chapel. Will sinks lower, pressing his ruined cheek to the grinning skull, his nails scratching over the marble as he chases the coiling pleasure, and Hannibal matches him pace for pace. Up and up, tighter and tighter, everything tensing, his breath ragged and then gone as he sinks his teeth into Will's injured shoulder, climax washing through him and his seed locked deep inside Will's body as his knot swells and pins them together.

This. Always this, Will. Forever.

Their hearts kick a staccato beat together. Every thud is the same. Perfectly balanced. Perfectly matched. Will releases a shaky breath, takes another, and purrs when Hannibal kisses the shell of his ear, his cheek, lapping up the blood.

'Let go, Will.' Hannibal soothes up and down his arms, coating him in his scent and encouraging tight muscles to relax into the stupor of Heat. 'I've got you. Just let go.'

I don't know if I can save myself. And maybe that's just fine.

Will shivers one last time, and then sinks beneath the waves.

***

EIGHTEEN MONTHS LATER

Candles burn brightly in the silver candelabras and Bach's *Aria* filters through the room. Bedelia Du Maurier sits at the head of her dining table, as elegant and regal as ever in an exquisite blue evening dress. The silver thread and tiny beads adorning the front catch the light, as does the sheen of sweat on her brow. Her blue eyes are thickly ringed with red, her back rigid with tension.

The table before her is laden with a feast. Glistening pomegranates and figs line the platter on which sits a succulent joint of meat. Glazed and marinated, it has been cooked in clay for several hours, and steam curls in the air, releasing the smell of candy-apples and pork.

Bedelia fights the creeping panic, glassy-eyed with shock, fear and the sedatives she can feel oozing through her system. She can hear hushed voices in the other room. A young girl's voice protesting bedtime. Will Graham soothing her and telling her to take her brother upstairs. And a deep, Alphan voice – Hannibal Lecter's voice – instructing them to listen to their father.

Bedelia eases her hand forwards, careful not to catch the diamond bracelet on her wrist against the metal charger plate. Her fingers close around a small but sharp two-pronged oyster fork and she slides it into her lap, concealing the weapon. The slit of her dress gapes where a cleanly bandaged stump rests on the padded seat, and she trembles as she stares at her leg, *her fucking leg*, on the table in front of her.

How did it go so wrong? She'd been running. Hiding. Taking every precaution. Eighteen months and then…

She can't run from this. She can't *run* ever again. Hannibal Lecter has won. He always wins, in the end.

Meat's back on the menu.

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